

A State of Conspiracy:
Syrian Challenges to Political Authority in the Course of
the Everyday

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I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work.

No part of this thesis has been submitted for publication or for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Abstract

Ethnography of the state has long been focused on either a state's reproduction of itself or on 'the people's' resistance to it. In both cases, the state is cast as a unified, holistic identity that exists in diametric opposition to the people living within its borders. There have been some recent attempts to speak back to these assumptions (e.g. Navaro-Yashin 2002), but we are still left with a monolithic image of the state. This thesis is an attempt to break down the 'obvious' divides between the reified concepts of People and State, especially in regards to Arab Middle Eastern countries. My analysis is based on 13 months of fieldwork in Damascus, Syria, where I witnessed how politics are lived and described in the course of everyday life.

This work focuses on popular stories about and interactions with what might be labeled global and state politics. Thus I read their stories to not be just narratives but narrative actions—a concept I suggest considering as a 'narraction' to encompass its seemingly dualistic, but practically singular nature. Political narractions in Syria often take the form of identity-work or conspiracy theory; this thesis approaches these as ethnographic objects and undertakes a more performative analysis of these narractions. I suggest that in narracting these stories, Syrians are doing a form of relations, making connections and disconnections between the various subjects within the narractions (and themselves) in a manner that is highly fluid and flexible and can seem somewhat ambiguous (if not in the conventional use of the term).

That there can be simultaneous connections and disconnections is not as mutually exclusive a state as it would appear and is also one that Syrians experience in relation to kinship and friendship. In a comparative turn, I suggest that in both familial and political relations, the disconnections (challenges) are not a form of 'resistance,' but are a negative (Narotzky and Moreno 2002) aspect of relations that are just as essential to the overall construction and maintenance of a relationship as the positive ones we are more familiar with (e.g. familial affection or political activism). Finally, I argue that this process of 'making connections' via observing and narracting relationships can provide a broader model of knowledge production that applies to the work of anthropologists as much as to the conspiracy theorizing of Syrians.

To Pappy, for passing on his strength

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A Note on Transliteration

For transliteration of Arabic words, I have followed the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. However, I have elected to leave personal and place names in their most common English forms, or how I saw them transliterated in Syria by Syrians (e.g. Alawi and not ^c*Alawi*). I have used the Syrian colloquial (specifically Damascene) dialect for my translations, which has some effect on the vowels; for example, *-eh* often represents *ta marbutah* rather than the classical *-ah*, and *o* replaces *u* where appropriate. Though *q* is usually replaced by a glottal stop in Syrian Arabic, I have, for the most part, included it to prevent confusion. I have also changed letters to account for Syrian pronunciation of them, e.g. *th* is often replaced by *t* or *s*. For ease's sake, I have also elected to leave the definite article in *al-* form, even in the case of 'sun letters.' When quoting transliterations from other authors, I have left the words in their original formats.

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The list of people I should rightly include here would likely wind up being longer than the thesis itself. However, I will do my best.

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Figure 1: Map of Syria

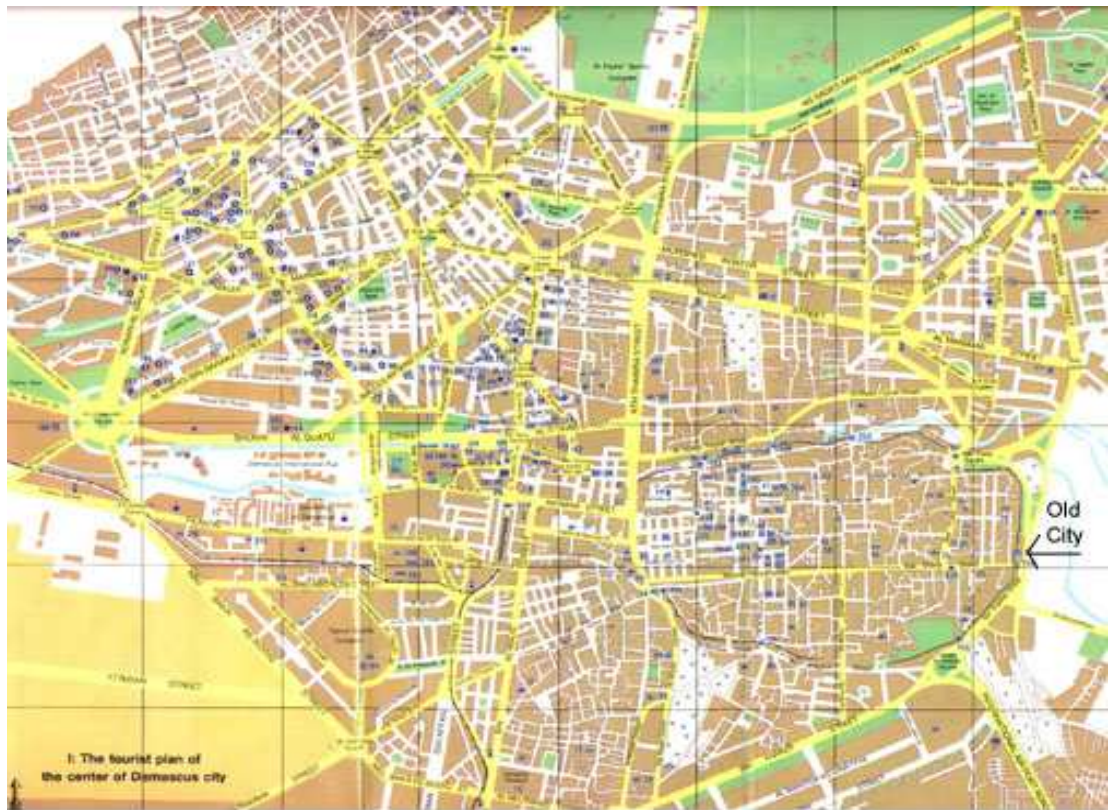


Figure 2: Map and aerial photograph of Damascus

1. Introduction

This is, above all, meant to be an ethnography of the state. When I left for Syria, I set out with the grandiose goal of uncovering or maybe discovering all that I could about state-formation activities in everyday life. As is the way of these things, what I thought I was looking for did not quite match what I found. The Syrian ‘state’ was a much more slippery thing to locate than I had imagined, even (or especially) in the capital city, where I had hoped it would be most visible. When I finally left Damascus, I was less certain of where or even *what* the ‘state’ was than when I had arrived. I have used this uncertainty to my advantage, moving from a standard ethnography of the state to a work that problematizes and ultimately questions the very existence of the state in Syria (or at least the applicability of the concept as we know it).

The ‘state’ in anthropology has become, and perhaps has always been, an ambiguous concept. On the one hand, it is used as an analytical tool, providing us with a broad framework with which to consider and compare the various processes of political power, much in the way that ‘identity’ or ‘kinship’ are used (cf. Eickelman 1989). On the other hand, it is an object to be unpacked using other analytics (e.g. methods of governance, class conflicts, etc.). But as much as it is an academic object, the state is also an ethnographic one—it is something that our informants themselves identify, interact with, and analyze. We need to consider it as such, but it is important that we do so beginning with our *informants’* object, rather than our own. For instance, I very rarely heard Syrians use the Arabic word for ‘state’ (*dawleh*) when discussing their own political situation (see Chapter 4 for elaboration on what they did use). What they explicitly interacted with was somewhat different than what I imagined I was searching for. Thus I have attempted here to focus on the same objects as my informants and to use their own analyses in order to gain an understanding of what and where the state might be in Syria. This ultimately has required not only a rethinking of the state, but also one regarding the production and (re)creation of social knowledge, amongst Syrians and possibly even anthropologists.

Life in Damascus

Damascus today is a sprawling city of several millions of people. A precise measure is hard to make because of the constant motion of people into and out of the urban space, from foreign (mainly Gulf) tourists in the summer to the daily influx of workers coming to work from their homes in the towns outside the city limits. My initial perception of the city when I arrived at the beginning of the summer (well into the dry season) was that it was tannish-brown. There was little in the streets, but it was somewhat less than I had expected after having been in capital cities like Cairo or Delhi. There is very little in the way of greenery, though people reminisce about a time as less than 50 years ago where a much-smaller city center was surrounded by verdant fields and orchards. There are a few parks here and there, though, and some of the larger sports complexes (there were four that I knew of) have some green space. The vehicle traffic is bad and getting worse, despite constant expansion of the roadways (that often takes an age to complete and occasionally leaves no discernible difference between what was made and what was there previously). Personal cars and thousands of taxis compete for space on the roads. For those who cannot afford these options, there are numerous micro-buses that run on fixed routes, which carry roughly 13 passengers and cost only five lira (roughly eight American cents). When I was in Damascus, there were also three major bus routes, with (relatively) timely, large buses that only stopped at specific spots, rather than the micros that one could get on or off anywhere. Some areas (such as Rukn al-Diin) even have unofficial systems where small trucks go up and down hills and carry passengers for a small fee. Damascenes are always moving as they criss-cross the cityscape for work, shopping, visiting, or play. Men, women and children of different ethnicities and religions sit side-by-side in claustrophobic conditions to get where they need to go.¹

For those living within the city, different areas of town have different degrees of status. For instance, some of the newer areas of town, especially around the hub (see satellite photograph, Figure 2) and the northwestern sections, tend to have broad streets with trees lining the sidewalks and apartment buildings rather than the

¹ There is some etiquette that has developed in this, especially in micros. Men will usually collect all the money from the passengers and be responsible for handing out change. If a woman is soft-spoken or does not wish to shout, it is also the job of (usually unknown and unrelated) men to relay to the driver when she wishes to get off.

‘traditional’ Arab, multi-generational house (Bourdieu 1977, Layne 1994). These tend to house the middle and upper-middle class Damascenes whose cars line the side streets. The area (*mantaqa*) in the northeast of the city called Rukn al-Diin is much less obviously wealthy (and is not even included on the tourist map), with winding streets that are steeply inclined as they slowly creep up the side of Mount Qasiyoun, which towers over the north side of the city. Rukn al-Diin is made up mostly of middle to lower-middle class families, many of them Kurdish. It is known for being more violent than many of the other sections of town, a fact that its male youth relate with a note of pride, chalking it up to the Kurdish temperament. Seida Zeinab sits on the western outskirts of the city and is so-named for being home to a mosque said to hold the remains of the Prophet Muhammed’s granddaughter. It is a popular Shi’a shrine and there are frequently innumerable Iranians in the area on pilgrimages. It is also where many Iraqi refugees have settled and is one of the only places I witnessed petty theft—the Syrian officials did not patrol the area as well as some others.

There are also several other suburbs and sections of town with varying degrees of prestige and history (cf. Salamandra 2005). Like in Cairo (Armbrust 1996, El-Messiri 1978), some of these are considered to be more ‘authentic’ and *Shami* than the newer sections, and the heart of this centers around Old Damascus (*shām* ‘*adimeh*, alternatively just *al-medinet al-‘adimeh*, the Old City). Bounded by the old Roman walls, peppered with ancient architecture, and metaphorically centered on the impressive Umayyid Mosque, the Old City and its inhabitants cover a wide breadth and depth of social life. Much of the city’s Christian population resides near the eastern gate of Old Damascus in an area called Bab Touma. The western end is occupied by long *suqs* (shopping areas), including the main one of the city, where people will come by car, taxi, or micro bus to do their gold, clothing, spice, coffee, etc. shopping, Suq Hamidiyya. The tiny streets are barely, if at all, big enough for a single car to get through, and many of the houses are ‘old’ style, with unassuming doors that lead into confusing sets of levels and rooms facing into a central courtyard. Some of these houses are breathtaking and belong to the old elite, some who still possess considerable sums of wealth. Others were abandoned as their previous owners moved to the more fashionable new town apartments and are now occupied

by those who cannot afford to move elsewhere. Also hidden away throughout the small alleys are an ever-growing number of 'traditional' cafes serving tea and *argileh* (water pipes); courtyard-ed restaurants serving traditional *mezzeh* meals with the local alcohol *araq*, sometimes to the music of a live lute player;² and the occasional nightclub where Arabic pop music is intertwined with the latest American hip hop.³ The clubs are filled with foreigner tourists and expatriates, young Syrian men who have a little money to spend and no work in the morning, and occasionally Syrian girlfriends, if they can manage to convince their parents they are spending the night with female friends. The restaurants are frequently packed out, usually by relatively well-to-do couples or friends who were out for a fashionable evening, to see and be seen (though the really upscale restaurants are in the mountains outside the city). The cafes catered to just about anyone, some being trendier than others. The one I most frequently haunted sat in the shadow of the Ummayid Mosque and was generally full of older men relaxing, younger men and women who either did not have the money or the inclination to go clubbing, and the occasional tourist group. The satellite television hanging in the corner provided a nice contrast to the bubbling fountain in the center.

Locating the State

My decision to locate my ethnography of the state in the 'everyday' has stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the ways that the state and state-like power are sometimes portrayed in anthropological literature. Much of the literature assumes a dichotomy between 'the state' and 'the people'⁴ that obscures as much as it illuminates when

²There seemed to be a divide between 'traditional' and 'modern' amongst these restaurants, and the presence of the live musician was almost always an indication of it being a traditional place. The more 'modern' feeling (and priced) restaurants and cafés more often played recent Arabic pop music. The clientele varied between the two accordingly; both catered to the middle class, but the elites generally only went to the modern places. Cf. Armbrust (1996) for a discussion of similar divisions of tradition and modernity and their impacts on the identity of the Egyptian middle class.

³ What there were *not* many of were theatres or cinemas. There was one big cinema (located in the expensive Cham Palace hotel) and several small theatres, but neither film nor theatre were very central to Damascene public life. Most outings involved food and drink, rather than 'arts,' especially among the middle and lower classes. This is somewhat of a contrast to Cairo, where cinema and theatre seem to have a much stronger presence among these classes (Armbrust 1996).

⁴ Mitchell (1991) provides a similar critique, though centered around state and *society*. He suggests considering the state as a "structural effect" as a method around this, but in doing so is still favoring

considering where and how ‘politics’ is done. This generally unquestioned divide leads to two perspectives on the state. One includes ethnographies explicitly about ‘the state’ (or state-like processes) that are usually focused on the state’s own practices and ideologies. These often rely on the examination of technologies of “governmentality” (Foucault 1991, cf. Gupta 2001) and “symbolic languages” of power (Hansen and Stepputat 2001) in the acquiring and maintaining of political authority; i.e. how a state recreates itself for its citizens.

My Syrian informants were quite familiar with many of the ideas within this literature, such as the use and monopolization of violence by the state (Alexander 1997, Hiatt 1989, Jabar 2000, Milton-Edwards 1998, Wedeen 2003) and the control of movement, especially vis-à-vis borders (Edwards 1998, Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Zureik 2001). Mapping and the drawing of state boundaries are frequently associated with state-initiated nationalistic projects (Biggs 1999, Radcliffe 2001) and featured heavily in Syrian accounts of their history, as did other state-based attempts at encouraging a national identity (including official accounts of history [Anderson, L. 1991]; privileged statuses [Hajjar 1996]; and appeals to broader ethnic identities [Hinnebusch 2001, Lavie 1990]). Surveillance and censorship practices as methods of exercising state control (Campagna 1998, Mitchell 1988, Salamandra 2003) were regular features of Syrian life. Public rituals and spectacles in Syria, from monthly testing of the air-raid sirens to political rallies, also exhibited the state’s attempt to make its presence felt (cf. Combs-Schilling 1989, Fujitani 1996, Geertz 1980, Jensen 2001).

Sometimes, however, the state makes appearances in ethnographic works that are not directly concerned with analyzing state power and processes. In these—especially in Middle Eastern ethnography—the state is often portrayed as a distant, but powerful figure that has the capacity to harm, help or otherwise influence the locality in question, but only does so on its own terms. For instance, Gilsenan’s (1996) work on Lebanese narratives includes characters that were involved in state-level politics (as local Ministers), but were remote compared to the ‘local’ figures under analysis. Other references to the state in his work are limited to large-scale governmental changes (e.g. moving from Ottoman rule to French rule to

state-based processes (borders, passports, law, etc.) and private *institutions*, rather than looking at popular portrayals and constructions of state effects.

independence) and the state's ability to interfere with matters of local concern (e.g. elections [1996:12], economy, and investment [1996:96]). Similarly, Layne (1994) focuses more on local shaykhs in Jordan than on the monarchy. When she does discuss the king or state government, they are depicted as coming from a position of superior power, able to regulate education (1994:90) or make decisions on treaties, the military, and the legislature (1994:144). In her study of domestic government in Yemen, Mundy (1995) does not include much about the state government except in relation to its ability to alter the legal system. For instance, she describes how, while local legal systems had initially been premised on a combination of Islamic jurisprudence and "common" law, the state disallowed the use of common law in courts. Islamic law became the only permitted legal basis, styled upon the state-centralized authority of "sheikhly politicians" rather than local custom (1995:204). These are not, then, just divides, but outright antagonisms between the people and the state.

My primary concern with most of these works is not that they are not useful, informative or strongly perceptive, but that they are premised on the existence of a strong state(-like) authority that has the ability to exert its will over a distinct and distinguishable population of citizens. The state-as-subject is granted agency to act, think, and desire. And yet there remains the fact that the state is made by and of people—people who exist outside of, as well as within, the state apparatus.⁵ They may act in the name of 'the state,' and they may even have the "discipline" to separate their home from their 'work' lives (Zaloom 2005), but they too are people. Or quite the opposite might be true; Gupta (1995) describes how local Indian bureaucrats often had their offices in their homes, showing how the ideal of a work/personal division can sometimes be blurred. At the other end of the spectrum, we create images of hapless citizens who are generally denied any sort of agency or effectiveness in participating in state formation except as passive and dominated

⁵ One of the best examples I have seen where this personal aspect of the state has been portrayed (if not explicitly) is Bein's (2006) article on Ottoman educational policies, where 'the state' is used interchangeably with names of individual leaders and policy makers in describing what decisions were made and why. It was not that 'the state' desired or designed specific things, but that these members of the state apparatus did.

recipients. Unless, of course, they are ‘resisting.’ Whether it is made explicit or not,⁶ there is, in much recent political literature, “the discovery of resistance almost everywhere” (Brown 1996:730). Such a ‘will to resistance’ (on the part of anthropologists rather than our subjects) is premised on the presence of the dominated, the marginal and the subaltern (cf. Ortner 1995, Skalník 1989) and their widely assumed desire to resist the forces of political hegemony.⁷

However, it can be difficult to determine a clear definition of what some of these labels mean, who defines them, and how we are meant to recognize them when we see them. Brown (1999:16) suggests that people are “constructed as marginal by the expansive states with which they come into contact,” but gives little indication when or to whom such a figuration applies. I found that the concept of marginalization was not particularly useful for my work on Syria precisely because I had difficulties pinpointing who exactly the ‘subalterns’ there might be. Would they have been the ethnic and/or religious minorities who were externalized by the cultural hegemony of the predominantly Arab, Sunni culture? The ruralites who were historically excluded from official channels of authority and control? The new urban poor? The former bourgeois elite? Ortner (1995:182) encourages us to return “thickness” to descriptions of resistance by including and acknowledging the “cultural complexity of power and resistance.” Whereas she argues that such an account will reveal “ambivalences and ambiguities [that] emerge from the intricate webs of articulations and disarticulations that always exist between dominant and dominated” (1995:190), all it seems to do in the case of Syria is to reduce the situation to an analytical mire. This is especially true given that, as we shall see, most ordinary Syrians have and are willing to activate connections to the “dominant” state apparatus. Can one truly hope to distinguish the dominated from the dominating (and thus potential spaces for resistance) amongst people who are not so removed from the processes of power as they might originally seem? I would argue not.

Indeed, Taussig (1992) questions our ideas about the constitutive power of the ‘center/margin’ in the State-making process. He argues that the State has a

⁶ Even if state studies do not explicitly feature ‘resistance’ as an analytic, many do contain a quiet implication that the state exists in opposition to the people under study (cf. Bayat 1997, Mundy 1995:202-4).

⁷ Which is not to say that such analyses are not applicable in some situations, just that we should not so readily accept them as *the* definitive categories.

fetishistic quality, especially in that it is (necessarily) composed of both pure and impure “sacredness;” in other words, “it is precisely the coming together of reason-and-violence in the State that creates, in a secular and modern world, the bigness of the big S” (1992:116, emphasis removed). This combination gives the State a magical quality, much like a totem, where it is a signifier that has erased and become more powerful than its signification. It may not exist as a ‘thing’ (“*res*”) but is reified and even deified as a magical entity. And this fetishism has similarities to traditional taboos, which, he contends, help to give totems their magical auras by restricting access to the totems to an initiated elite. States, too, can be thought of as having a limited elite who have access to the workings of politics. But in both cases, he says that it is those who are restricted, the marginalized portion of the population, who create the power of the totem, rather than the initiated few. “Might it turn out, then, that not the basic truths, not the Being nor the ideologies of the center, but the fantasies of the marginated concerning the secret of the center are what is more politically important to the State idea and hence State fetishism?” (1992:132). Here we see that for Taussig, there are centers and margins of power, but he reverses much of the common sense approaches to power by suggesting that the real process of creating the State as a reified/deified thing lays precisely in the hands of the marginal and not the (apparently) powerful.

There are also works that challenge and blur the lines between center and margin (or state and people) rather than problematizing our perceptions of where creative power lies. Hansen (2005) describes the case of local Big Men in India who, acquired a degree of “*de facto*” sovereignty, working both within and around the state’s legal frameworks. They did not belong to a helpless mass of people, but nor were they agents of the state. However, Hansen is more concerned with notions of sovereignty and authority and does not explore the implications such figures might have for how state and people are conceptualized. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) also describe people in ambiguous positions regarding the state. Their research concerns state agents in India who “swooped down” on local agencies in surprise inspections. While acknowledging the somewhat liminal status of these employees, who were both agents of the state but also highly localized and distanced by it, the authors choose to focus on this as process of “spatializing” the state as a “higher” (on a

vertical scale) or “broader” (in a model of encompassment) authority. In their work, these in-between employees are used to support claims about state actions, rather than being a location for the questioning of a state/people divide.

Gupta (1995) outright challenges the idea of a distinct state versus civil society, arguing that this is a too Western-centric paradigm for the state. Indeed, much of my work follows on his, for as he suggests, “rather than take the notion of ‘the state’ as a point of departure, we should leave open the analytical question as to the conditions under which the state *does* operate as a cohesive and unitary whole.” He does so by looking at everyday discourses (of corruption) in India as a space in which the state is created and challenged, and how lower-level bureaucratic offices are primary sites of popular state construction. In such spaces, ordinary people are shown to interact with, navigate, and construct (or deconstruct) the Indian state. He focuses on discourses of corruption (usually leveled at these bureaucrats) not only because they highlight what different people think norms and standards of conduct *should* be, but also because they “undermine the credibility of the state and to attack the manner in which government organizations operate” (1992:389).

In a similar vein, Pierce (2006) looks at how corruption requires that we rethink our paradigms of the state. While corruption might be seen to be a failure of the state in Euro-American terms, he suggests that Nigerians perceive corruption, or more correctly what they call ‘oppression,’ “as being the norm, an intergral part of governance. This did not make state actors illegitimate in people’s eyes” (2006:899-900). What he argues through the course of his examination of the historical bases for the seemingly corrupt workings of the Nigerian government, is essentially that (in a Taussig-like fashion) the state is nothing more than an image with no signifier precisely because (*contra* Taussig) it does not hold any mystifying power over its population. It is, here, *people*, specifically the population of the country in question who have the ability to construct the state. “The history of state formation in northern Nigeria...is not one of a government’s coming to ‘see like a state’ but rather of a transformation that enabled it to look like one. The euphemizing quality of the state-effect never got off the ground” (2006:909-910). The only people to whom the Nigerian government looks like a state is outsiders, not the all-important (for state construction) insiders, and because of this, “the net result is that ‘the state,’ except in

a grossly empirical sense, is an illusion” (2006:911). It is people’s creative power and belief in that power, that constructs the state.

There have also been several ethnographies based in the Middle East that challenge the idea that the state, rather than people, has sole power to create itself. Salamandra (2000) describes a social category that gained popularity in Damascus that was neither ‘Syrian’ nor sponsored (or even encouraged) by the state apparatus. It was instead a sort of grass-roots ‘return’ to a specifically *Damascene* identity. Her account describes how ‘people’ had co-opted what is often described as a political, and often state-based, process of identity creation (cf. May, Modood and Squires 2004). However, though she shows how the state does not have the sole claim on defining its populations’ categories, she does not examine the deeper implications of this. Jean-Klein’s (2001) study of nationalism in Palestine takes a further step by explicitly challenging the idea that nation-building processes cannot take place from the “bottom up.” Rather than having a nationalistic project imposed upon them, she shows how Palestinians during the first Intifada were actively and knowingly involved in “self-nationalizing.” Their actions of suspending their normal life practices (e.g. weddings, picnics and social visits) are shown to be ways in which they were creatively involved in the Palestinian national movement while simultaneously resisting a foreign hegemonic power. She illustrates that it is the anthropologist who insists on glossing these actions as *either* resistance *or* nation-building. For the Palestinians, the two processes can be, and are, one and the same. Though writing about a state-less society, she nonetheless presents a possible avenue of escaping the artificial state/people dichotomies that plague our writings.

Within and throughout her critique, Jean-Klein (2001) brings up another concern that stems from the way in which such studies of nationalism and resistance are presented (by anthropologists): “methodological concentration on authoritative practices emanating from political and cultural centers...has insistently figured nationalism as a category of practice committed by one group (rendered active and *immoral*) against another (passive but *innocent*)” (2001:86, my emphasis). She and others suggest that much of this ‘romantic’ (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990, Ortner 1995) tendency stems from a trend to try and account for anthropology’s early collusion and intersection with colonial projects (Jean-Klein 2001:84-85), leading to studies

that are infused with a “moral self-validation” (Brown 1996:733). Such a criticism equally applies to how the state has been approached as an object of analysis. The two “groups” in Jean-Klein’s account can easily be re-read here as ‘state’ and ‘the people.’ Thus in our unquestioning use of this dichotomy, we rely on and (re)make moral judgments regarding the objects of our studies. However, by being aware of the moralistic implications of the state/people divide, we can circumnavigate this concern via explicit acknowledgment of the dangers in such a model, rather than unthinkingly reproducing a discourse of good people versus evil state.

It may well be that some state-centered, resistance or similar studies *are* set in contexts where such analytics are the best possible choices for studying political movements. Many examples readily come to mind where people (but not *the* people) are in disagreement or conflict with their governmental figures/institutions. It is only that authors do not always question how they choose to position their accounts and what the implications of their work might be (i.e. to reify a problematic distinction) that I take issue with. Our informants might choose to narrate structural and moral divisions between themselves and their rulers, but that does not mean that we, as anthropologists, should take their existence for granted. I would suggest that one way to handle these various dilemmas is to return to the concept of ambiguity, not as an analytic (as Ortner 1995 seems to suggest), but as an anthropological object that itself needs to be brought under the microscope.

The Meaning of Ambiguity

It seems that one cannot read an anthropological account without running into the term ‘ambiguity.’ By the same token it is difficult to find a text that does more than include it as a descriptive or exegetical device, rather than explaining what is meant by it. Sometimes it is used to indicate a situation that is unclear. Bayat (1998:168), for instance, describes the Iranian revolution as having a “remarkable ambiguity” which he contrasts with the “clarity” of the Egyptian Islamist movement. He attributes the ambiguity of the former to a lack of well thought-out policies and amorphous, non-categorizable goals. Similarly Throop (2005:507), in his reading of Robert Levy’s *Tahitians*, shows, and does not question, Levy’s conflation of the terms “vague”, “diffuse”, and “ambiguous.” In describing “uncanny” experiences,

Throop himself says that they are “an ambiguous variety that *actively resists categorization*” (2005:505, my emphasis). In these cases, then, ambiguity is defined as something that cannot be categorized. Returning to the linguistic origins of the concepts, both of these situations would seem to fall under the term ‘vague’ (something that is not clear in context and *cannot be categorized*) rather than ‘ambiguous.’ Vagueness is a fuzzy, indistinct state, and one that is itself distinct from ambiguity.⁸

Ambiguity, according to its definition, is something that is liable to more than one interpretation or meaning, or that has two or more specific meanings that make sense in context.⁹ A phrase is ambiguous and not vague when it can be interpreted in multiple ways, rather than none. Anthropologists’ use of ambiguity covers this more accurate meaning as well. Piot (1993), for instance, describes how the Kabre of northern Togo take advantage of the multiple meanings and interpretations made possible by ambiguous statements. An example he gives is a naming situation, where a child was named “I feed God” to indicate that his mother had had many children die before him (thus returning them to and “feeding” God), but also contained an implication that a co-wife was a witch and responsible for the previous babies’ deaths. Though direct family members might have known both meanings behind the name, outsiders did not and were left to speculate which of the various (discrete) possible interpretations was correct (1993:358). Similarly, Rasmussen (1992) details the seemingly variable statuses and traits that blacksmiths and Islamic scholars have amongst the Tuareg. Each category has certain characteristics that would appear to be dominant, but could be inverted. For instance, the blacksmiths’ destructive and heretical power could be used for good (e.g. for exorcisms), while the scholars’ power, meant to be benevolent, could be used to advance personal, rather than social, ends.

These are ambiguous figures or situations because they can occupy or enact different roles at different times, and thus have the potential to *be* a number of distinct and distinguishable things. As I noted, Ortner (1995) encourages us to draw

⁸ Thus there is some humor in the fact that anthropologists’ (as a collective) use of the term ambiguity falls in between two categories (ambiguity and vagueness) and is thus itself vague, but not ambiguous.

⁹ One example provided by Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambiguity>) is the famous Groucho Marx line where he says, “Last night I shot an elephant in my pajamas,” and, in a play on the phrase’s ambiguity, follows it by saying, “What he was doing in my pajamas, I’ll never know.”

out the ambiguities in our research, but seems somewhat inconsistent in her use of the word. On one hand, ambiguities appear to be ethnographic objects that “emerge from the intricate webs of articulations and disarticulations that always exist between dominant and dominated” (1995:190). But in another section, she suggests that we “introduce complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction into our view of the subject” (1995:184), making it out to be an analytic that the researcher would bring to bear on a subject. It would seem that at least some of the anthropological confusion stems from a question as to whether ambiguity rests with the ethnographers or the subjects. In Piot’s examples, the subjects are manipulating ambiguity in order to conceal or reveal certain meanings, thus situating the ambiguity as an object, whereas the blacksmith/scholar example seems to be ambiguous only for the ethnographer—what seems to us to be ambiguous (spanning multiple categories), is not necessarily so for the Tuareg. In *their* categorization of the world, blacksmiths and Islamic scholars inhabit their respective categories of ‘smith’ and ‘scholar,’ whose roles do not contain any contradiction or awkward interpretations because they are categories-in-themselves. Rasmussen states that one of her goals in her article is to encourage anthropologists to move away from the reification of Western-based categories by casually imposing them on subjects. As Scott (1998:347) notes, it is the “[high-modernist’s] simplifying fiction...that, for any activity or process that comes under its scrutiny, there is only one thing going on.”

As I suggested earlier, Jean-Klein (2001) presents a way of thinking around the problems of ambiguity, suggesting the term “duplexity.”

Duplexity contains no such claims about subjects’ consistency of practice. It signals the event, denied in existing discourses, whereby subjects, through specific courses of action, address *two* discrete interests, problems, or projects *at once*....Activists have no need to deny or hide the double-edgedness of their activities—to be *duplicitous*—because they do not view them as invalidating one another (2001:92).

I agree with Jean-Klein’s argument that duplexity and ambiguity are different things, and will borrow her term when I encounter situations that merit it; i.e. for actions and narratives that effect multiple outcomes. However, I will continue to use ambiguity when I feel it is more appropriate (though with the caveat that the lack of clear understanding is usually on the side of the ethnographer, not my informants). I

suggest that Syrians' actions and narratives have a fluid, transient quality to them, creating two-at-once effects through the rapid shifting between different potential meanings (a sense that duplexity implies; Jean-Klein, personal communication). Thus, what we might normally perceive as 'ambiguous' or vague—a grey, uncertain area—might actually be our failing to account for a shifting between black and white.

'Narr-acting' the World

I recognize no absolute distinction between discourse and practice; in Damascus...social and cultural life takes place in and through language (Salamandra 2004:23-24).

One of the first instances of duplexity I wish to address is that of the process of narration in Syria. The relationship of word to deed has a long history in anthropological scholarship (especially in relation to ritual, cf. Tambiah 1968), and I imagine that what I intend to briefly outline here will sound familiar to many researchers who have worked in Arab and Middle Eastern settings.

My experience with words and actions in Syria matched that which Salamandra describes; discourse and practice were indeed indistinguishable. Speaking things and doing things were often the same process. This idea is perhaps most visible in terms of religion. 'Qu'rān' literally means 'reading' or 'recital,' but speaking or reading the text is never *just* an act of (what we would consider) reading, but also one of exhibiting and demonstrating piety. Or *ṣalāt*, the daily prayers of a Muslim, are not merely recitations of religious canon, but simultaneously "affirm and defin[e] the practitioner's 'belief', [and thus] establish a web of social relations" (Henkel 2005:500). Praying is also, Henkel suggests, a transformative process, making any place temporarily into a mosque and the person into a Muslim practitioner (2005:497).¹⁰

A number of scholars have also examined the role of speech acts in more social settings, especially in the Arab Middle East. Caton (1990:21), for example, considers the ways in which "poetry in tribal Yemen is both the creation of art and the production of social and political reality." He looks at a number of different

¹⁰ Cf. Hirschkind (2001) and Mahmood (2001) for further examples involving Egyptian cassette-sermon listening and the creation of piety, respectively.

forms of (male) poetry used in tribal Yemen and the various sorts of social reality that they are involved in creating. Some forms, especially those created during wedding ceremonies, outline what it means to be a tribesman, thus asserting the poet as a proper tribesman and simultaneously illustrating for the groom (now on his way to manhood) what is expected of him. Other forms are central to the process of dispute mediation because it is highly persuasive and calls on (and thus defines and asserts) the honor of all those involved in the dispute. A third form that Caton discusses involves poets addressing and suggesting solutions for wider social and political problems. He argues that for poetry to be considered good, it must be of immediate or current social relevance; e.g. love poetry is considered to be a man's first forays into poetry and not his best work, where the real masters are those who face problematic social and political issues with their poems. Caton finds "that tribal poetry is constitutive of social reality in compelling ways precisely because of its integration with the forms of everyday and tribal life" (1990:268). The act of creating poetry is itself part of being a tribesman. And through this poetry, tribesmen recreate an identity for themselves. Interestingly, and somewhat in contrast to my experience of speech acts in Syria, poems in Yemen are dialogic, always involving multiple participants who will challenge each other and respond with their poetry. Different kinds of poetry have different forms of transmission (some are improvised on the spot, others are written out), but their audience is almost always other Yemenis (the other poet/s included), thus extending their impact and constructions of identity onto a broad social landscape.

Swedenburg (1995) and Bowman (1994) also examine how words can do things, though they both focus on the politically and socially more turbulent area of Palestinian nationalism. Swedenburg focuses on how old Palestinians remember the revolt against the British in the 1930's. Interviewees followed the 'official' Palestinian rhetoric of unity to different degrees, but overall he seems to suggest that they would readily speak of how united all the different peoples within Palestine were—for instance, that there was no religious sectarianism because everyone was *Palestinian*. Thus these narratives of their memories also included a collective forgetting of (some of) the divisions that *were* present within the Palestinian community at the time, though class divisions were sometimes narrated in the

remembering of how the elites were not seen to be as involved as the peasants. Part of this, he argues, is about reconstructing a solid Palestinian identity in the face of Israeli oppression, but part of what is remembered or not is also tied to current social organization. For example, during the period of his fieldwork in the mid 1980's, there was a great deal of religious tolerance, especially between Christians and Muslims, and even intermarriage. Thus, like how and what people (publicly) remember is tied to sentiments and ideas that they are trying to present and encourage today.

Bowman also looks at how Palestinians construct a national identity through the use of narratives, but focuses instead on how different experiences of homelessness can produce varying understandings of what it means to be Palestinian. He looks at works published by an author living in a Lebanese refugee camp, a wealthy expatriate living in the U.S., and a Palestinian living in occupied Palestine. Despite their different ideas of Palestine and how they portray them, what they have in common is that their words create a shared identity for Palestinians based on the fact that they all consider themselves to be repressed by the same antagonist (Israel). Here, then, a Palestinian identity is negatively created (against Israel), but the divides within Palestinians become visible as each author uses his own narrative to define and create his own version of Palestinian-ness. Again the audience is interesting here. Unlike the Yemeni case, the audience here is often a foreign one, as Swedenburg's work is based on a series of formal interviews with a foreign anthropologist and Bowman's chapter is primarily concerned with three books that have been published in the international market. The identities being created here, then, are as much for international consumption as local.

We see, then, that the idea of speech acts constructing and defining social and political identities is not new for this region. Much of the analysis in this thesis is premised on similar understandings of the power of words. Like Swedenburg, I will look at how narratives of history construct certain identities in the present, and, like Bowman, how the cracks and divides in a social identity can be seen through narratives. However, unlike these two (and more like Caton), I intend to examine those narratives which are not (only) intended for a foreign audience, but are also, if not more so, aimed at other Syrians. For as he saw that poetry was a regular part of

everyday life, I observed that political narratives-cum-speech-acts were a regular feature in Syrian life, if not as stylized. To emphasize the narrative quality of most of the stories I heard and to therefore differentiate such acts from other forms of speech acts, I suggest the introduction of a single-word term that attempts to encompass but still indicate (what we see as) both aspects of narrating and acting: namely a ‘narr-action’ (and hence narracting, narraction, etc.). I have hyphenated it here to make clear its origins and that it is not a typographical error, but will use it as a single word throughout the rest of this thesis. I have chosen here to make it a *single* word (as opposed to Jean-Klein’s (2001) “narrative actions”) in an attempt to aid in the intuitive understanding that, for my informants, these were not two distinctive things that took place at the same time, but rather a *single* process of speaking and doing. The introduction of this term has helped me to more fully comprehend what I observed and was told in the course of everyday life in Syria.

Methodology: An Everyday Site

One of the practical ways I have attempted to counter my dissatisfactions with previous studies of the state and their ‘top-down’ approaches to it or ‘bottom-up’ tendencies to avoid paying it critical attention has been by adopting a theoretical and methodological stance that is quite familiar to students of resistance—namely via examination of the everyday.¹¹ James Scott (1985) popularized such a location for studies on resistance and Jean-Klein (2001) suggests to use the everyday as a space for examining (re)creative political processes as well. And as she perceived Palestinians engaged in processes of “self-nationalizing,” the same may hold true for the (re)construction of the state. Locating my fieldwork on Syrian politics in the everyday reveals a ‘state’ that is more personal, less distant, and less of a unified agent than most anthropological texts have led one to expect. The Syrian ‘state’ is not always very state-like when viewed from this particular perspective, leaving one to question whether or not the term is wholly applicable in this context. My intention was and is to observe people (not *the* people) and see what they make (literally) of

¹¹ Indeed, Wedeen (1999) centers much of her work examining Syrian resistance in “mundane transgressions” (1999:87).

other people in and outside of Syria (including those that might be in state-like positions). This stance is primarily informed by my informants, as they did not talk about their ‘regime’ in terms of institutions, laws, agencies, constitutions, rhetorics, or flows of power that were devoid of people—these were not seen to exist without people to interact with and drive them.

Methodologically, this has meant avoiding spaces of “governmentality” and other such sites where the state has often been seen to (re)produce itself. Though I could have easily focused on people’s daily interactions with the state vis-à-vis such institutions as schools, health centers, police departments, or the Traffic Ministry, I have chosen to only include them when they were of interest to my informants’ lives. I instead preferred to see how ‘ordinary’ people (i.e. not directly involved in the structures of ‘state’ authority) chose to talk to me and each other about ‘politics’ (*siyāseh*). I left for the field with no expectation of what (if anything) people would tell and show me. What I got was, among other things, identity-work and ‘conspiracy theory.’

There is a possible critique here about my having perceived “the bottom” (i.e. the people) to be more ‘authentic’ than “the top” (i.e. the state) (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). However, authenticity as such was not an explicit concern of mine, as my goal has not been to uncover some sort of ‘truth’ (as seems to be the case of many anthropologists, cf. Brown 1999, Briggs 2004, Scheper-Hughes 1996, 2004). There are, I would argue, no degrees of authenticity; everything was as authentic as everything else, given (what I see to be) Syrians’ methods of knowledge production (see Chapter 3). To search for authenticity would, I feel, be to ignore the ways that Syrians themselves observe, analyze and create their world. Tellingly, I found that when Syrians related political narratives to me, they would not use the word ‘truth’ (*al-ḥaqīqah*) to describe events or relationships, but rather described their narrations as things ‘known’ (*maʿrūf*), a thought I shall return to.

Hypothetically, I could have sought out informants who inhabit a ‘liminal’ state-people space, but there were two major complications with such an idea. The first was practical—such people were harder to source than ‘ordinary’ people and the few I did meet were often reluctant to talk to me out of fear of my being an American spy. Second, such people were usually much better versed in telling people like me

what we wanted to hear; i.e. they were more familiar with academic and Western discourses on politics, civil society and the like. For instance, I had one person describe the violent reaction in Damascus to the Muhammed cartoons printed in several European newspapers in 2006 (the Danish embassy in Damascus was attacked) as “really” being about political, rather than religious anger. He told me that oil prices had recently been raised by the Syrian regime and people had not been able to display their outrage. When, a couple of weeks later, people got word of the cartoons, they used that as an excuse to vent their frustration against their own government. The informant had spent some time in the U.S. and (implicitly) understood that such an explanation would be more comprehensible to a Western audience than religious violence. On the other hand, other informants, less familiar with Western forms of reasoning, assured me that the attack *was* to do with religious outrage and was understandable (if somewhat extreme in some people’s opinions) as such. Neither interpretation was less valid than the other, and I am sure both believed what they said, but the latter felt less tailored to appeal to my sensibilities.

There is also the question of why I chose to frame my research in terms of the ‘everyday’ rather than the ‘local.’ This decision was intentional. ‘Local’ is often portrayed as being in contrast to the state, the global, or some other ‘level’ of organization. Much ethnography centered on the local takes place in relatively containable (if not isolated) settings, such as a village or small community (c.f. Gilsenan 1996, Layne 1995, Mundy 1994). Firstly, I did not want to reinforce or assume the presence of such ‘levels’ or ‘scales,’ given that much of my work seems to challenge the idea that Syrian society is scalar. Secondly, my setting was the capital city of Syria, the effective headquarters of the state. There were no real ‘local’ levels of governance, no local leaders or semi-autonomous hierarchies. Finally, Damascus was not neatly bounded in any way; the physical ‘local’ space included several million inhabitants, who were not necessarily a cohesive or organized group.¹² Even smaller sections of the city were not easily distinguished into localities as there was no physical demarcation delineating one from the next. Family and friend networks extended across the entire cityscape, making it difficult to pin down

¹² Though, as I shall return to at various points throughout the thesis, Damascenes were, in a sense, an *ideological* category.

or compartmentalize people. Thus Damascus itself did not present any obvious (or unobvious) possibilities for framing my research in ‘local’ terms.

However, ‘local’ might be said to involve a more social, rather than political or locational aspect. ‘Civil society,’ or various formal and informal organizations, is sometimes considered to be a form of ‘local’ organization (cf. Chatty and Rabo 1997) that, among other things, acts as an intermediary between the people and the state (Kamrava 2001). However, aside from leading me back to the people/state complications I have been trying to avoid, none of my informants belonged to anything that might be readily classified as a local, civil society-like organization. Hinnebusch (1995) attributes this lack of a strong civil society in Syria to the fact that the Ba^cth Party’s rise to power occurred at the expense of such associations. He suggests that Islam is the closest thing to civil society, but indicates that this is *because* religion provides the only real space that allows the disenfranchised to resist state power (1995:220-226). Again we are back to the people/state divide. Thus neither the concept of civil society nor the ‘local’ proved to be of much use to me, either methodologically or analytically. What I instead found useful were everyday narrations of the political.

On Identity...

The Opening Forms

“Before I begin, I should explain to you the different groups¹³ we have here in Syria...” Many of my informants began their narrations with such a statement, followed, unprompted by me, by a list of the different social categories they considered to be present in Syria: the Kurds, living either in the northeast or in Damascus; the Armenians in Aleppo; the different Christian groups—Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Catholic; Aramaics and Assyrians; Sunni Muslims; Shi’a Muslims; the Bedouin, both nomadic and settled; Ismaili’s; Alawis; Druze; and even

¹³ Occasionally my informants word use the word *jamā^cah* to indicate group, or sometimes *majmū^c*, but more often than not, they would use the English word ‘group,’ especially when speaking to me, even if the rest of their sentence was in Arabic. In either language, this particular term was used to indicate a collection of people, be it a large, such as religion or ethnicity, or a small one, such as a circle of friends. To my knowledge it was never used to refer to family unless there was a very large gathering (such as at a wedding).

some gypsies (*gitanes*, from the French word—no one seemed to know much about them, though one informant speculated that they are related to those in central Europe) (see Figure 9, p.157) . Even this is only a partial list, as most Syrians could identify a large number of such groups in Syria, though they rarely knew much about those outside the ones they themselves fit into. They often knew even less about the Alawis or the Druze than other groups, aside from both being very secretive about their respective religions (usually cast as distinct from Islam), and that the Druze were renowned for their expansive hospitality and moustaches.¹⁴

When recounting such lists for me, speakers did not seem to make distinctions between what I would consider different types of social identity categories, such as ethnic, religious, or even linguistic ones. What interested me was not so much the specifics of the groups identified as the fact that Syrians themselves readily made explicit and thus (re)created these distinctions between people. There were no questions of validity or legitimacy surrounding the creation or existence of these divisions; they were considered to be ‘natural’ (*ṭabīʿī*) and therefore acceptable (a sharp contrast to what we will encounter in Chapter 2). When I tried to ascertain what the Syrian word for ‘identity’ was, I had a great deal of trouble doing so. I explained to a friend what I wanted to know and the only word he could give me was *ṭāʾifeh*, which literally translates as ‘sect.’ But while Syrians did not seem to have a ready word for the abstract concept of ‘identity’ as social scientists use it, they had a very clear one of the practical experience of it. Identity was not something that was theorized about, it was something that was lived, enacted, and narrated. It was, in other words, an *ethnographic object*.¹⁵

Ortner (1995) urges us not to readily accept the holistic nature of groups and to reveal the divisions within them. But it would seem that Syrians are a step ahead of anthropologists: once my informants had named (and thus reified) various groups, they would turn around and show me just why the group could not be considered a

¹⁴ Both the Alawi and Druze religions are considered to be sects of Islam, but it seemed that most of my informants did not know or did not want to acknowledge that. I had one Druzi informant, and she herself said that she knew nothing about her religion except that she had to marry a man who was also Druzi.

¹⁵ Salamandra (2004) notes a similar tendency among Damascenes. She suggests that ‘sectarianism,’ a common way of examining identity work in the Middle East, is not an appropriate term because, as I found, it was a *local* distinction. She uses “social distinction” as an analytical category instead (2004:11-12).

(holistic, concrete) Group. They did not need me to tell them about the impermanent nature of identity,¹⁶ because they were much more familiar with its cracks, divisions, and broader unifying factors than I ever could have been. Someone was Kurdish, but (with a note of pride) was Damascene (*Shāmī*) as well—and perhaps ‘original’ (*aşlī*) Damascene. Another person was Sunni, but was also Homsī (from the city of Homs). There was a great deal of pride embedded in one’s origins, and I discovered that asking after someone’s origins (*shu aşlik?*) was one of the first things one did upon meeting someone new. Practically, it meant “where are you from” and more specifically “where is your family from,” but the answer spoke volumes about a person—what we might call ‘social identity’ was very much a part of a person’s ‘self identity’ (cf. Dresch 1984:36).¹⁷ Having an answer was important, to be from *somewhere* in particular and thus to be situate-able as someone.¹⁸ Being called homeless could be an insult. “Why are you dressed like that? You look like you’re homeless.” Understanding and navigating where they were from and who they were was a regular feature of Syrians’ lives.

One afternoon, I held what was effectively a two-hour focus group on the topic of ‘identity’ at a meeting of the Syrian Debate Club.¹⁹ As the Club was, essentially, a way of practicing advanced English by discussing various social issues, I was able to use it as a forum for holding such a discussion. That it was all in English made my job easier, though it did sometimes limit the level of the content. The participants, however, were willing and excited to talk, and once they began, they continued for the full time without my intervention. The result was an insight for

¹⁶ This fluidity somewhat parallels Meneley’s (1996) observations that females in Yemen, through their regular visiting and socializing, can contribute to the shifting of their family’s status and identity.

¹⁷ The relation between one’s origins and oneself possibly holds the answer to Dresch’s (1986:391) critique of academics’ “stress on individual actors...where [as opposed to individuals as automata in a structure] there are only individuals, and vertiginously free ones at that.” *Aşil* implies that an individual in Syria is not only composed of him or herself, but of other people as well. Cf. Chapter 7, on *sharaf* and Jean-Klein’s (2000) “cross-embodiment.”

¹⁸ I discovered this the hard way. I spent most of my childhood moving from one state to another, and my ancestors came from all over the world. I have never had a fixed “home,” but when I tried to explain that to Syrians, they were usually horrified and then unsure how to treat me. Without an origin or a home, I became a somewhat uncertain and pitiable figure.

¹⁹ Obviously a pseudonym. A potential limiting factor was the background of the Club—all those present were from a socio-economic class that was comfortable enough to allow them to attend one of the most expensive English-language institutes in Damascus. They spanned ethnic and religious divides, but were mostly from the educated, upper-middle class of Syrian life. Another limit was that the host institute and founding members strongly discouraged the discussion of any topics deemed ‘political’ (or in some cases, ‘too overtly political’ or even ‘too overtly political in reference to the Syrian government’).

me into how Syrians feel, think about, and do identity. One of the conclusions was that it is a confusing topic, and they discovered that they were often unable to come to a consensus,²⁰ especially on terms such as ‘Arab.’

The participants also brought up the flexibility and multiplicity of identities that each person carries (again beating anthropologists to the punch, cf. Gregg 1998, Oomen 2004), and how the idea of groupness is a “contextually fluctuating conceptual variable” (Brubaker 2004:54, *pace* Merton 1972). One informant said:

How we think of our identity can vary. We often identify ourselves *against* another group, especially in terms of wars. If there is a war in Iraq, we suddenly become Arabs. If Israel attacks Palestinians, we are Muslims. Problems and war in Lebanon has made us think of ourselves more as Syrians.

They were well aware of the impact of global, political, and religious contexts on their sense of how they categorized themselves. They were also aware of the emotionality, Epstein’s (1978) “affectiveness,” of identity (cf. Campbell and Rew 1999). For instance, another participant pointed out that

Identity depends a lot on what people *believe* and can depend on the day or on experiences. In Syria, we waver a lot based on emotions. Say, today, a Christian insulted me. Afterwards I will say I hate all Christians. Or if I saw a news report on Americans killing Iraqis, I will say I hate all Americans.

Identity-Work

It would appear, then, that Syrians were familiar with the idea of identity being “social relations, not ideology” (Eriksen 2004:93). Rogers Brubaker (2004) challenges anthropologists to examine “ethnicity without groups,” but my informants were already better at considering identity categories both with and without groups than I was. Given that they had thus pre-empted several of my potential analytical moves, I find myself unable to use identity itself as an tool to unpack their narrations. Yet, at the same time, because it is an object for my informants who readily analyze it themselves, I cannot just adopt it as my object of study. I would not be able to contribute much more (if not less) than a reiteration of their conclusions.

²⁰ A sentiment most social scientists would be inclined to agree with, I should imagine.

Likely I would not be able to do that as effectively as they, for they narrate the processes of identity with a speed and ease that the laborious nature of writing and ‘thick description’ could not hope to keep up with. As I struggled to “shift scales” (Strathern 1991) to accommodate them doing Arab-ness or Syrian-ness or Damascene-ness, they lightly and rapidly flitted through them, as if such a scalar perception did not really apply to the way they lived and perceived their world.

Rather than be disheartened that my informants seemed to be a step ahead of me, I am again choosing to use the fact that my informants were already doing reflexive identity-work *as* my ethnographic object.²¹ I am choosing to approach Syrians’ narrations of identity from a performative stance,²² allowing me to examine what (else) they might be ‘doing’ as they are doing and considering identity. By this, I do not mean equating doing identity-work with doing other things like politics; that has been explored elsewhere (cf. Hann 1997; May, Modood and Squires 2004). In a sense, I intend to move to a model of relations that is broader (and less scalar) than ‘identity’ or ‘politics’—one that can incorporate both concepts simultaneously or in turns (as Syrians so readily do). It is not necessarily a difficult leap for anthropologists to consider doing identity as a form of doing social relations—even Syrians know that; however, what I am considering is what kinds of social connections and disconnections Syrians make when they narrate ideas of identity. It is my hope that introducing a model of scale-less and fluid social connections (a field where social knowledge more generally is produced) will enable me to move beyond what Syrians themselves (to say nothing of anthropologists) already do. Fluidity becomes crucial here, for “social ‘permanence’ [is] the effect of constant repetition of social-corporeal instantiation” (Jean-Klein, in press); in other words, relations (including identity-work ones) are not so much “material artifacts” as things that are constantly being (re)produced. Thus “imagined communities” (Anderson, B. 1991), be they ethnicity-, religious-, or state-based, become communities that are constantly in a process of being *re*-imagined.

²¹ Contrast this to Bhaba (1994) who argues that identity is a thing ‘done’ by relating to the Other, rather than as an ethnographic object done (by informants) for its own sake.

²² Bhaba (1990:3) argues that we need an “understanding of the performativity of language in the narratives of the nation.” I would say the same is true of state, identity, and other such categories.

Thus, accounting for fluidity and emphasizing the consistently temporary aspect of relating to self and other does away with the problem of contradiction by embracing it. People are never still, meaning that any narrations involving people will have to shift to reflect both the ever-changing subjects as well as the ever-changing narrators. With their narrations, Syrians are constantly (re)positioning others in relation to themselves (rather than the opposite which is how it is often phrased). In other words, people do not necessarily belong to a particular pre-existing group, but rather create one around themselves. When many people consistently do so, they generate the effect of a collective group, if one that is as likely to fracture as it is to remain whole. Thus, at any given moment, an individual can belong to many, diverse groups, depending on how they place those others in relation to themselves. Groups as a *potential* collection of people might precede individuals (i.e. individuals learn from others what categories have been enacted before), but they cannot precede people. This, I argue, is the bases for social knowledge in Syria: a concept that involves positioning people ‘inside’ or ‘outside,’ making connections and disconnections. But connections and disconnections do not always have to be mutually exclusive. Sometimes they are the same thing and are both necessary to do a particular relation;²³ in these moments it is only the anthropologist, concerned with her personal schemata, who sees them as being distinct (and ambiguous). Adopting such an approach is, I feel, a strong way in which to approach the narrations, identity or otherwise, that I encountered in Syria as my informants negotiated their positions in their world(s).

...And Conspiracy

While sitting at lunch Alia²⁴ mentioned idly that she had heard that the Jews had been responsible for President Kennedy’s assassination. I rolled my eyes and told her that Arabs were always saying that. She misunderstood me and asked if I thought all Arab ideas about the

²³ “Every relationship is built on connection and disconnection; there would be no link if there were no differentiation” (Strathern 2005:167 note 32). Or, as Jameson (1981:41) suggests, “Difference is the distinguishing of two phenomena from each other, their structural separation, the affirmation that they are not the same, and that in quite specific and determinate ways, is *also* a form of mediation [defined as ‘establishment of relationships’].”

²⁴ I have changed the names and incidental details of my informants to preserve their anonymity. None of the details changed have an impact on their ethnographic significance.

world were wrong. I told her no, I just meant that they always blame *everything* on the Jews, at which point she threw back her head and cackled in acknowledgment.

Alongside identity-work, another type of Syrian narration that I encountered took the form of what I was first inclined to call ‘conspiracy theories.’ Conspiracy theories, as narratives of intrigue and power, have likely been around for as long as there have been power struggles. However, it is only recently that they have become a focus for academic studies. Hofstadter (1965) considers the historical presence of conspiracy theory and how such theorizing related to a ‘paranoid style’ in political thought. Jon Anderson (1996) briefly describes how conspiracy theory is a performative style of political analysis, and involves a process of “entextualization” of personal narratives into a more expansive “meta-narrative.” However, his description of them as “premature entextualizations” makes them out to be too ‘early’ or uninformed. Pipes (1996) specifically looks at Middle Eastern conspiracy theory, but focuses more on official rhetoric than popular stories. He is openly critical about the validity of the theories and conspiracy as a form of theorizing. Marcus’ (1999) edited volume returns to the idea of paranoia, though this time highlighting it as ‘reasonable,’ especially in the post-Cold War era. One of the major problems in most of these works is that there is a sense of dismissal of conspiracy theorizing as a valid process or analytical approach to power and politics. While taking their subjects seriously, the authors still convey an image of the ridiculous—labeling something as paranoid already sets it a certain distance from those of us who would like to consider ourselves both rational and *not* paranoid. Even anthropologists, with our long legacy of dealing with alternative, but valid systems (e.g. witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard 1937) relegate these alternative knowledges to being *only* valid in particular (Other) settings and somehow being shown up by Western/anthropological knowledge (e.g. Hellinger 2003). As Boyer (2006:331) notes,

the dynamic of the dialectical anthropology of conspiratorial or ‘spectral’ knowledge often takes the form of a process of exposition of ideological reason by critical reason, a process that seeks to validate

the former's basic rationality even while asserting the latter's power of rational correction or perfection.²⁵

Another problem with many studies of conspiracy theories is that they tend to be grounded in Euro-American settings, rooting them in both a specific contextual 'tradition'²⁶ and a moral figuration²⁷ that underlies any attempts at assessment (c.f. Davis 1971, Knight 2001, Marcus 1999, Melley 2000). However, some anthropologists have begun stepping outside such a framework. West and Sanders' (2003) volume looks at conspiracy theory's relation to (primarily non-Western) "occult economies." They begin by providing a definition that tries to dodge some of the more negative associations that conspiracy theory tends to have, suggesting that conspiracy theories (and theorizers) "concern themselves with the operation of secret, mysterious, and/or unseen powers...[and] that there is more to power than meets the eye" (Sanders and West 2003:7). Such a definition resonates strongly with my experience of Syrian conspiracy narratives, though I am somewhat put off by the volume's over-riding emphasis on multiple modernities (vis-à-vis discourse on transparency, cf. Lilley 2001 who approaches conspiracy theory from an auditing and accountability framework) and the treatment of "conspiracy ideas as discourses that *construct* truths in contradiction to the (also *constructed*) truths of discourses of transparency" (Sanders and West 2003:15, emphasis in original). Conspiracy theorizing here comes off as somewhat reactionary—indeed, what is this if not a return to an academic love of 'resistance' (cf. Briggs 2004)—and obsessed with 'the truth,' which the anthropologist is able to reveal as uncertain (c.f. Parker 2001:200). Silverstein (2000:8), in contrast, moves away from a resistance stance, suggesting that conspiracy theorizing is a form of "vernacular knowledge production...[that] reinforces state power at the very moment of its greatest challenge." He recognizes in it the potential for duplexity, allowing for it to be a process by which people narrate

²⁵ In other words, anthropological knowledge inherently "generate[s] others: 'our' knowledge contained a difference between 'theirs' and 'ours,'" (Strathern 1995:162-163).

²⁶ One might argue, though few in this field have, that the tradition underpinning this theorizing is concomitantly being reproduced *by* the process of conspiracy theorizing, but that remains a project for another day.

²⁷ In a correct/incorrect or reasonable/irrational sense more than a good/evil one.

both disconnections from *and* connections to their state.²⁸ Parish (2001:8) also emphasizes the importance of knowledge, suggesting that “conspiracy theorizing [might] also become a way of *assembling possibilities and information*, rather than recovering a truth, in a culture obsessed with connections and interpretation” (my emphasis). And as I suggested in the above section, I would argue that Syrians are people who *are* explicitly concerned with making “connections and interpretation[s].” Perhaps identity-work and conspiracy theorizing are not so disconnected as they might seem on the surface, at least from a performative analysis.

Despite, then, what our informants might be doing, it is often academic portrayals of conspiracy theory that defines it as a search for the Real behind the simulacra, we who are “combin[ing] radical doubt with the sense that the truth is out there” (Stewart 1999:17). Such an understanding might not be wholly appropriate in the case of Syrian conspiracy theorizing, but it does speak volumes about the practices of anthropologists and other social scientists themselves. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996, 2004), for instance, attempts to trace out the invisible economies that underlie a number of organ trafficking conspiracy theories. She is, herself, searching for the ‘real’ underpinnings of her informants’ narratives. While offering an interesting exploration of global power, she does not substantially provide us with much more than her informants did, resting her (anthropological) analysis on the same basic ‘information’ and knowledge. In a sense, her work is an extension of theirs, just with the advantage of mobility, rather than taking a further analytical step.

Further, she ultimately relies on the same assumptions as her informants—that there *is* a reality, a truth, that might be out of sight but that can be uncovered. Then again, this is probably true of social science more generally. K. Brown (1999) lauds Karakasidou (1997) for her continued attempts to uncover the truth despite all the odds being stacked against her. M. Brown (1996:731) and his research partners found themselves confounded by murky facts “even as [they] tried to *get to the bottom* of things” (my emphasis). Scott (1985) urges us to look for what people really mean or are really doing (i.e. resistance) in the course of their everyday lives. I

²⁸ Though he, as so many others, situates his work in ‘extreme’ settings—amongst violence and social upheaval in the Algerian civil war in his case, amongst subalterns or dispossessed for many others—rather than as an everyday process set in a ‘stable’ political context

present this not as a critique of anthropology, but at our lack of reflexivity for failing to address how our work and that of conspiracy theorizing might not be so methodologically or analytically different. Indeed, as Boyer (2006:337) suggests, it often turns out that “one mode of conspiracy and transparency—ethnography—has sought to reveal another.” We should therefore take care not to casually dismiss the validity of conspiracy theorizing as an analytical form, nor should we assume that our work is somehow superior because it is based upon ‘more’ information. There is a touch of irony to all of this: it would appear that anthropologists are quite ‘cynical’ (Žižek 1997, cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002) in that, while we would be the first to assert that there is no ‘real’ truth, we continue to *act* as if there were.

And all this is to say nothing of popular ideas on conspiracy theory. In popular (Euro-American) culture, there are certain assumptions that the term brings to mind. Conspiracy theories (and theorists) are fringe elements of society—they are a discourse of the disenfranchised who do not belong to any sort of mainstream political process (subalterns again!). In fact, this is a theme repeated in academic works on conspiracy theory as well, where it is the marginalized populations who are depicted as using conspiracy theorizing as a form of resistance (cf. Briggs 2004, Humphrey 2003, Parker 2001). In either case, ‘normal’ people do not engage in or fall for such wild tales, which are perhaps composed of facts that are true in isolation, but make connections that are not rational, much less verifiable. There is no way to test a conspiracy theory *because* of the very hidden nature of what it proposes. And in a ‘modern’ world, where we are raised with and reliant on a scientific method that holds that nothing *can* be true unless it can be tested and verified, these theories hold no water. Except that this neat division between rational and irrational is even somewhat vague in our own scientific thought. For, as Bateson (2000:74-75) says, scientific hypotheses are as likely to be based on “wild hunches” that are later formalized through analysis and testing as they are to be based on anything more rational and less “mystical.”

So where can I go from here? Many of the ‘political’ narrations I encountered in Syria seemed to fit the bill of a conspiracy theory. Indeed, in their more reflexive moments, some of my informants would laugh over their own tendencies to see conspiracies in everything—they anticipated and already engaged

in the potential ‘critique!’ However, just because Syrians were able to laugh at themselves did not mean that they took themselves any less seriously,²⁹ but it is another reason why I can neither simply extend their own arguments nor rely on paranoia or other such analytics. Syrians are reflexive about their theorizing, and I must account for that. Nor can I rest on analytic stances that look for the disenfranchised (and thus take the analysis to one of resistance), mainly because in Syria, these are not fringe narrations. I found that the same or similar narrations were repeated across a vast number of social and cultural lines (including class, religion, generation, and gender). Perhaps one could argue that the vast majority of the Syrian population could be classified as ‘fringe’ due to their distance from the processes of power, but I have already dismissed such an option.

And, as I noted earlier, Syrian narrations often had more to do knowledge—or more correctly, a form of knowing—than with ‘truth.’ Like identity-work, conspiracy narrations seemed to embody a performative act, one that was not solely concerned with (re)presentation of politics but with the ‘doing’ of social relations in a political vein. I would argue that this is not such a great leap, and it is one that has been nearly made before, if not quite so explicitly. Michael Gilsenan’s (1982:75-92) description of miracles in a Sufi order somewhat parallels conspiracy theory: miracles, he says, may appear to be sequences of mundane events, but from a certain perspective become miracles. To deny that the miracles are indeed miracles, or rather, to be unable to see the miracle beyond the mundane, serves to position one ‘outside’ the group composed of those who see the miraculous. So we have here an instance where the ability or willingness to see (and momentarily connect) what is unseen is, at the same time, a process of doing social relations.

The only problem I have now is how to deal with the moral ambiguity with which the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is saturated in English.³⁰ I find I am hesitant to use the term at all, given how laden it is, so will avoid the problem by generally using ‘narration’ instead. Syrians’ narrations contained suspicion and doubt, were about power, and assumed that there were things that took place out of sight. As such who

²⁹ I am reminded of the adage that the world does not cease to be funny when you cry, any more than it ceases to be serious when you laugh.

³⁰ Honestly, what is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase ‘conspiracy theory’? Illuminati, the JFK assassination, the film starring Mel Gibson?

would not initially read these as conspiracy theories? I did and therefore bring it up in order to delineate how what I am doing is different from what has come before. In the end, what I hope to show is that such narrations (whether they appear as conspiracy theorizing, identity-work, or something else) are a way to engage in politics vis-à-vis creating boundaries of inside and outside, doing relationships, and connecting (or disconnecting) the dots³¹—whether they be visible or no.

* * *

My intention here is not to deconstruct the state, in full post-modernist vein, into nihilism. Whether or not there is such a thing as ‘the state’ is irrelevant; what is important and, I argue, the only thing we can actually engage in, are the relations that people make to it and each other. I am suggesting that to assume a universal form for the state brings us dangerously close to imposing a Western, liberalistic scheme of rule onto systems that may or may not fully fit into such a rubric. My preconceptions of what a state should look like did not quite fit my observations of how people conceived of and ‘did’ their state in Syria. In fact, I had trouble separating people from state, making it difficult to perceive them as being in the kind of opposition that many social science works take for granted. It may well be the case that countries throughout the world have developed or adopted state-like procedures along the Euro-American model, but it is not sufficient to assume that all situations have everything (or indeed much at all) in common. This thesis, then, is an exploration of another way to consider the state in Syria, relying heavily on a model of knowledge production that is premised not on theory, but on the ways in which Syrians themselves construct and know their world.

I would ask the reader to approach this thesis as I approached my ethnographic fieldwork: with an open mind. We can never truly enter into any endeavor completely devoid of expectations or preconceptions, but what is remarkable about anthropology is that it always encourages us to try. To help that process, I intentionally avoid the use of certain terms throughout the course of my

³¹ A metaphor that I came to on my own, only to afterwards find that Jean and John Comaroff (2003:297) had already used such a metaphor in relation to conspiracy theory—if only briefly.

writing.³² In some instances, the lack makes their presence more obvious, but I hope that it also helps to problematize the issues and even illustrate how certain terms may not be necessary. More than anything, it has been an exercise to force me into thinking outside the box, rather than allowing me to easily slot my findings into the handed-down molds that the literature has provided me. I have had to consider and think about what I observed and was told in different terms, which (I hope) has helped me to see what Syrians were creating rather than what I expected. To this end, I have tried not to use the word ‘state’ or other terms readily associated with the state, such as ‘citizen’ or ‘civil society,’ except where citing or explaining relevant literature. In that light, I would also ask the reader to set aside the idea of the ‘state’ for the time being and see what might be found instead.

The chapters are laid out as if they followed a “scalar” plan, moving from the global to the local. I did this intentionally. There are moments when the dis/connections that I draw out double back or seem out of place, where the relations I describe do not seem to consistently match the “scale” that I have placed them in. I hope to illustrate with this jumpiness that, anthropological preconceptions notwithstanding, middle class Syrians organize their world in their own way, one that does not necessarily match up with ours, adding further support to the idea that we may need to rethink our (scalar) models, at least in relation to Syria. Part I, then, deals with the ways that Syrians interact with and narrate ‘foreigners,’ historically and today. Part II looks at the way that Syrians do the same with their own regime, and Part III does the same for relations between ordinary people in Syria.

³² Cf. Reed’s (2003:19 n.3) description of the “literary practice of Oilipo...[that] advocate[s] an aesthetic form of formal constraint.”

I.

**INSIDE/OUTSIDE:
PLACE IN THE WORLD**

2. “Outsiders” on the “Inside”: Yesterday and Today

Much of this thesis is devoted to examining how Syrians (itself a constructed category) relate to other people and momentarily make or remake group boundaries; in other words how they position other people as ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ certain frameworks through their narrations. Historically and presently, there are a number of arenas in which *potential* ‘outsider’ figures (they are neither insiders nor outsiders until they are made to be so) have come into contact with people who, for convenience’s sake, I am temporarily calling Syrians. All of these different interactions have an impact on the ways that Syrians engage with and understand a wider global context in relation to themselves. With that in mind, this chapter will briefly explore the history of Syria, both ‘real’ and narrated; the centrality of borders (including linguistic ones) within that history; how Syrians seek and acquire knowledge on foreign ‘peoples’ and places; and how all of these play a role in how Syrians do relations with people today.

A Historical Glance at External Figures in Syria

Strathern (1991:94) has suggested that there is a “paradoxical sense...that ‘if only one knew’ one could fill in the historical details of how things...were transmitted between different populations, but one would not in fact be adding substantially to the knowledge of social process.” Obsessing over history as a hermeneutical device has its dangers. She goes on to argue that “the new question instead becomes the process by which local social forms developed” (1991:94), which I would take to include a degree of historicity. Though set in a different time and location than Strathern’s work, this thesis is nonetheless concerned with “local social forms” that developed and are developing in Syria. What I am therefore looking for in a reading of history is to see where Syrians have previously connected themselves with (or disconnected from) other people in order to see who has been made into insiders or outsiders and how.

Another reason why I consider it important to include this section is because informants would frequently narrate their history/ies to me. They used history as a

way to highlight an ideal era ('what was'), to explain the loss of that idyllic status in terms of an event ('what happened'), and how both of these now impact their current situations as Syrians, Arabs, Muslims, or whatever else they might be now ('what is'). I, on the other hand, am attempting to examine these accounts to see how it is that Syrians' historical narratives are also a process of doing relations with people *in the present*.

However, there are two (hi)stories here that I will be presenting: the narrations of my informants and the history according to various (usually European-authored) textbooks.³³ Though the former is vastly more interesting for my work here, the latter has its place as well, in part to highlight the points of digression in the narrations, where what was recounted to me did not always match that which was recorded elsewhere. The texts also provide some sort of grounding that is somewhat less controversial for my readers.

I will begin my history at the point at which most of my Muslim informants began theirs: the reign of the Ottoman Empire. Occasionally I would be told stories about earlier historical periods, but usually in the context of religious history, where people would describe the life of the Prophet Muhammed or Christians would tell stories of early saints. However, these were often presented as merely light or educational stories, lacking the non-verbal clues that signaled the sort of intensity that conversations beginning with the Ottomans often had. The major difference in content was that the more recent stories narrated the presence and actions of (thereby creating) various groups that are still regularly encountered today (versus the Romans, who are no longer extant). It is with the Ottomans, therefore, that I begin.

³³ My informants were familiar with textbook history, though usually the official Syrian version learned in grade school, which I did not have the opportunity to study in depth. What little I knew of it was second hand; for instance, one informant recalled an instance of being punished in class for insisting that a schoolbook was wrong. It had said that Syria had won the 1967 war with Israel and he did not think this was the case (many Euro-American texts would agree with him).

A Textbook History

The Ottoman Empire

The Ottomans ruled over Greater Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*) from 1517-1918 and formed a state dominated by Turkish leadership, “but it was not Turkish in any exclusive racial sense...[the difference between the different Islamic people] was never a distinction so deep as to destroy the sense of what they had in common as Muslims” (Hourani 1981:7). For Hourani, it seems that religion had a unifying power that overcame any other social divides, a proposition that Syrians did not necessarily agree with: Kurdish informants often told me that they considered Kurdishness to be more significant than religious divisions, and differences between sects of Islam were readily highlighted as distinct categories. Further, not everyone living under Ottoman rule *was* a Muslim, hindering any absolute religious cohesion.

The Ottoman empire encompassed many different geographic regions and religious communities who were ruled over by a singly royal family, enacting “an ideal of rule common in later Islamic history...the ideal of the absolute ruler” (Hourani 1981:9, cf. Ibn Khaldoun 2005:107-108). Underneath this family, there was no structural exclusion of any Muslim, regardless of origin, to gaining rank and power within the hierarchy. This was especially true on local administrative levels, where strong families (such as the Azem family in Damascus), local lords, or nomadic sheikhs gained recognition as local leaders as long as they acknowledged the authority of Ottoman rule and paid the appropriate tribute and taxes. In Damascus, the power base rested almost solely in urban leadership, a trend that continued to exist as a basic form of governance through the French mandate as well (Khouri 1987:3). The Turks incorporated non-Muslims into the empire by protecting their freedoms to worship as they chose. The *millet* (nation) system was instituted by Sultan Mehmet *circa* 1450 CE. Under this system, the Sultan selected and appointed religious leaders for each of the major “book religions” (Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox Christian, and the Armenian church). Because the Sultan appointed these leaders, their loyalty to him was guaranteed. The *millets* were a way to manage populations of different religions by granting them partial autonomy, and the religious leaders were

made responsible for points of religious and domestic law in their communities (though cases were arbitrated in Shari^ca law courts in cross-*millet* conflict) (McCarthy 1997). Damascus, as a major religious center, and Aleppo, as a major trade center, flourished under Ottoman rule, even while other urban centers began to decline by the end of the eighteenth century (Hourani 1981:9-13).

But life for the Ottoman rulers was not without its complications. In the nineteenth century Kurdish and Bedouin chiefs in the countryside began to slowly accumulate a degree of power that challenged that of the Ottomans (Hourani 1981:49-51). There was even an uprising in Damascus against Ottoman rule in 1831, sparked by the imposition of a new personal tax on Muslims that was added to those already in place under the auspices of Islamic law. The Ottoman governor who had imposed the new levy was killed and the rebels briefly took control of the city until a new governor was assigned. He made peace with the rebels, and agreed not to push through the tax law (Schatkowski-Schilcher 1985:41-43).

In the latter days of Ottoman power, there was a slowly-increasing European presence throughout the Middle Eastern and North African regions, initially focused on trade. European nations began to set up consulates and become involved in local politics, favoring and protecting different (usually minority) ‘groups’ when convenient (e.g. the French intervention during the massacre of Christians in Damascus in 1860; or the close relationship between the British and Druze populations in Lebanon) (Hourani 1981:63-5). The European presence also led to intellectual changes among the population itself, with translation of French and English books and journals, re-organization of teaching and military policies (cf. Mitchell 1988 for an extensive analysis of this process and its effects in Egypt). New ideas about ‘society’ began to spread, in particular

the idea that it should be organized on a basis of nationalism, of a sentiment of a national loyalty and unity in which members of different religious or social communities should join; a nationalism explicitly secular but having, like everything else in the Middle East, a concealed religious element³⁴ (Hourani 1981:16).

³⁴It is unclear whether Hourani’s “concealed religious element” reflects the ideas growing at that time, how people adopted it despite its intended format, or his own retrospective opinion of it.

Serb and Greek populations initially began to pull away from the empire in order to form their own nation-states, followed by Armenian, Arab, Albanian and Kurdish ones.

The population of Greater Syria had also begun to resent their Ottoman lords. As early as 1914, there were worries of Ottoman corruption, and “many high officials were suspected not only of normal corruption but of dispatching fortunes abroad” (Longrigg 1958:48) (an accusation that resurfaced in current times in narrations about corruption in the highest echelons of the Syrian regime). There also were a number of Arab nationalist³⁵ movements that appeared in the years before World War I, usually located abroad and peopled by expatriates from Arab territories.³⁶ It is doubly interesting that this nationalist sentiment was initially organized from a space *external* to Syria, usually in a European setting where authors of such movements witnessed nationalist sentiment there. Some of the best known of these organizations were *al-ʿAhd* and *al-Fatāt*, which gained strength from the growth of a distinctly ‘Arab’ resistance to Ottoman/Muslim rule (Petran 1978:52).

Dislike for the Ottomans was compounded by the dispatch of governor-general Jamal Pasha to forcibly take control of Syria in 1914. Under his rule, there was an economic crisis, mass starvation, and calls to provision the army when people could not fend for themselves. He was also given the title ‘The Bloodshedder’ as he implemented a number of political massacres in an attempt to bring the Arab nationalist (and thus inherently anti-Ottoman) leaders under control. This included hangings on May 6, 1916 in Damascus and Beirut that have come to be called ‘Martyrs’ Day’ and the places where they occurred ‘Martyrs’ Square,’ names still used today. Nevertheless, Hourani implicitly points to a *European* basis (and not local nationalist sentiment) for the fragmentation that followed the fall of the Empire, ultimately culminating in the seemingly random carving-up of Bilad al-Sham in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement (a similar, if unreflexive, argument that my Syrian informants echoed).

³⁵ Petran (1972: 57) puts forth the idea that much of this nationalism, as it filtered down to the more general (versus the educated) population, picked up a religious quality—becoming more of a Sunni Muslim nationalism, with occasional overtones of fanaticism.

³⁶ Though this was not necessarily always the case, as Khoury (1983:95-6) argues that secular Arabism was “first planted by some Syrian Christians involved in an Arabic literary revival in the last half of the nineteenth century.”

The French Mandate

However, the people of this region were ready to get rid of their Ottoman rulers-turned-oppressors and hoped that the end of World War I would bring them independence. But the Sykes-Picot agreement, generally ratified by the international world at the San Remo (Italy) commission in 1920, gave France a mandate over Syria and Lebanon and Britain the same over Palestine and Iraq. Ostensibly, their presence in these nascent states were meant to last until the latter were strong enough and had the frameworks to stand on their own (Hitti 1958:238-41). The people of Syria did not accept this decision and rallied together to create a government for themselves. Led by Hashim al-Atasi, they wrote and implemented a constitution that detailed a federal system under the rule of King Faisal, but this rule was soon dissolved as the French marched into Damascus. Yousef al-Azmeh (who remains a hero today, with his own statue and square in the New City of Damascus, Figure 3) led a ragtag set of forces to hold the French back, but the Syrians were massively outclassed and defeated in a matter of hours (Petran 1972:59-60).



Figure 3: Yousef al-Azmeh Square, Damascus

The French initially set up a number of previously non-existent economic, political, and public service frameworks throughout Syria (and Lebanon), focused on

road and railroad building and the introduction of a new currency tied to the French *lira*. For administrative purposes, the French divided up the already-fragmented Syria into four smaller ‘states’—centered around Damascus, Aleppo, the Druze population in Jebel al-Duruz, and the Alawi population in Latakia (Hitti 1958:242-4). The resentment of this “dismemberment of geographic Syria” was compounded by the *institutionalization* of differentiation,³⁷ as “the French...recruited officers and men for the local forces...disproportionately from the Druzi, Alawi, and other minority communities, and favored the minorities in public appointments even at the highest levels” (Petran 1972:61, 62). (Seale [1988:16-7] similarly notes a trend of French preferential and ‘protective’ treatment towards such minority groups). The French methods of rule throughout the early 1920’s was mostly geared towards the greater good of France and neither the good nor the eventual independence of Syria, further contributing to Syrian ill-will. With French rule, Syrians experienced oppression, repression, corruption, loss of language (French was officially placed on par with Arabic), economic problems, and a lack of public health care. All of these factors combined provided the groundwork for the revolution of 1925 (Petran 1972:63-5).

“Nationalism” (*waṭanīya*) was present in Syria, but was complicated by the recent historical situation.

No Syrian could find a national identity in truncated and partitioned Syria. The national movement insisted on the reunification of geographic Syria...Arab unity then meant primarily Syrian unity. At the same time, by their very existence the artificial frontiers acquired a certain reality while truncated Syria gradually developed a personality of its own. Moreover, from a practical point of view, nationalists were compelled to concentrate on removing internal barriers within French-mandated Syria, and to fight France for national rights, while their brothers in Palestine confronted the British (Petran 1972:66).

Thus we see, in conjunction with an Arab nationalism, the beginnings of a more specifically *Syrian* sense of identity, prompted by the realities of the ways in which political lines had been drawn. The leaders and people faced a situation where they were engaged in the seemingly contradictory processes of unifying and connecting people (in doing Arab-ness and Syrian-ness) and of diversifying and disconnecting

³⁷ Though, as we have seen, the pre-mandate era was not free of differentiation, both informally with different religious and ethnic divisions and officially with the *millet* system.

(in making distinctions between Syrians and other Arabs) (cf. Jean-Klein 2001). And “although nationalism was clearly a rising star before the war, it was the French occupation of the Syrian interior in 1920 that ensured the dominance of the new ideology” Khoury 1987:97).

The revolt of 1925-7, then, erupted in part because of the growth of a Syrian identity. However, the fight for independence itself potentially had an impact on the way these sentiments developed. The uprising lasted for two years, beginning amongst the Druze in their ‘state,’ and then spreading to Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. Because it started with a religious minority, the rebellion stood the chance of being centered around a religious cause. However, it instead took on a trans-sectarian quality, gaining supporters from a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds and from all walks of life from prosperous merchants to peasants (Khoury 1987:205-7). Thus, rather than supplementing or recreating one particular religious identity, the Druzi revolt simultaneously reinforced and (re)created a broader, Syrian one (Petran 1972:66).³⁸ The exception to this was the Alawi community which was well-placed in the French military and chose to maintain some distance from the separatists (Seale 1988:18).

However, much of this action was centered around a desire to modify, rather than overthrow the French system, with former urban leaders attempting to reassert their role as intermediaries between the overlords and the general populace (Khoury 1987:165). The struggle certainly did not result in an independent Syria. Not long after, the already unpopular reputation of the French was heightened when they ceded the area in northern Syria around Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939 (Hitti 1958:244). The Second World War introduced a new set of complications into Syria’s status. “In the first years of the war...many nationalists in Syria and other Arab countries put their hopes in Axis victory,” because such a victory would mean the end of French and British domination in the region (Petran 1972:77). Though technically granted independence by Free France in 1941, nothing had really changed—foreign powers were still running the country in all but name, until Syria formally broke off relations with France in 1945. France retaliated by bombing

³⁸ Though Khoury (1987:164) reminds us that the Druze rebel leaders had had previous ties to Damascus’ politics and were already “familiar with and sympathetic to the nationalist creed of Syrian unity.”

Damascus, which stirred up international outrage and pressure for the full removal of the foreign presence. A year later, the final evacuations were carried out and Syria had, for the first time, full autonomy (Hitti 1958:247-9). With such a black history, it is hardly surprising that Syrians often do not remember the period of the French Mandate fondly.

A number of political parties had formed under French rule, often specifically pro-Syrian in nature. The National Bloc arose in the late 1920's, composed of educated men with a secular, urban background, who wanted the independence of Syria. This Bloc "steer[ed] the course of the independence struggle in Syria until its completion," but was ultimately revealed to be ineffective in actual leadership apart from just resisting the French rulers (Khoury 1987:248-284). Another group that rose up after the National Bloc had fallen apart was the Ba'ath Party, headed by the Damascene schoolmasters (i.e. learned men) Michel Aflaq, a Christian, and Salah al-din Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. It was an especially appealing party for the young and the dispossessed, giving them an opportunity to speak out against the French occupiers. The party struggled to find its place, moving in and out of power, splitting into different factions, and wielding varying amounts of influence throughout the region. After gaining its independence, Syria briefly unified with Egypt, which caused the country and the Ba'ath party to lose a great deal of power and respect. The question of whether to split with the Egyptians and, once the split had occurred, to reunite, drove a deeper wedge between different factions within the Ba'ath Party. There was a series of successive governments in Syria as coup after coup took place. The final one was in 1963, when a small contingent of Ba'ath Party members took control of the military, Damascus, and the country. There were five initial members of this team, several of whom featured heavily in the intra-party power struggles over the next several years. One of the youngest, and the one who finally won out was Hafez al-Asad.

Syria in the Cold War and Beyond

In and around this time of internal strife, the effects of the Cold War were extending to the Syrian borders. In 1954, Syria, ostensibly allied with the USSR, received

armaments from them.³⁹ The Ba'ath party in Syria had adopted an anti-imperialist, anti-Western stance and was officially a socialist party (if not exactly an ideological match of Soviet communism) and thus was an obvious ally in the Middle East for the USSR. The USSR, for the Syrians, provided a powerful sponsor that was not historically involved in colonial schemes and that supported the nationalist tendencies of the newly-forming country. A British-U.S.-Iraqi conspiracy to launch a coup against the Syrian government in 1956 (fearing that Syria was on the path to becoming a USSR satellite) was discovered and outraged the Syrians, providing them further incentive to ally with the Soviet block (Golan 1990:140-3).

The presence of the USSR in the Middle East not only involved supplying arms to their allies, but also information, and in May 1967, the Soviet president informed the Egyptian envoy in Moscow that Israel was planning an attack on Syria. Nasser took this news as a green light to attack, thus providing one catalyst for the outbreak of the 1967 war. (Others included the 1966 Israeli invasion of Jordan, border skirmishes and an air battle between Syria and Israel in early 1967, and Palestinian attacks on Israel [Seale 1988:126-128].) Part of the Soviet reasoning for providing such information may have been to strengthen the Atassi regime in Syria with whom they were friendly, in order to counteract the political unrest growing in Damascus. By providing an outside threat (Israel), the USSR could hope that Syrians would unite under Atassi, while the involvement of Egypt would keep Israel at bay and prevent actual war from breaking out. There was also the hope that the situation would discredit the U.S., as the sole supporters of (purportedly) aggressive Israel (Golan 1990:58-62). We then see a historical precedent of Syria being manipulated by a superpower for reasons that had nothing to do with the good of the Syrian population, a theme that reappears in Syrian narrations of current politics.

In 1970, the competition for power within the Ba'ath Party came to a head, with Hafez al-Asad ultimately gaining control. He was willing to maintain relations with Moscow, but “for many years to come he jealously guarded Syrian independence by refusing to enter into a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty” (Golan 1990:145). Following the 1973 war with Israel, Egypt turned its back on the Soviet

³⁹ The Middle East, though, was not high on the list of Soviet priorities, except in terms of economic competition with both communist China and the capitalist West, maintenance of friendly borders for the USSR, and the blocking of European and Japanese oil interests (Golan 1990:1-3, 16-7).

Union and looked to the U.S. for support. Syrian-Russian relations improved accordingly as both agreed that Anwar Sadat was a traitor for having done so—Arab leaders could also use divisions to their advantage. Though Asad needed Soviet arms and support to match Israel (Syria's ultimate enemy), he was very careful to keep his distance, not wanting to sacrifice Syrian autonomy (Seale 1997:69-71). During the 1990-91 Gulf War, Syria joined the American coalition, but more out of worry that if Kuwait fell to Saddam Hussein, Syria would be the next target (though long-standing tensions between Syria and Iraq likely played a part as well.) However, at the same time, the defeat of Iraq meant that there was virtually no hope of an Iraqi-Syrian alliance, the only combination in the region that could realistically have posed a threat to Israeli power. Thus the Cold War had a profound effect on shaping Syria's history as an independent state. It came into political being in a climate of conspiracy and superpower confrontation, while balancing dependency on foreign aid with independence (Seale 1997:73-6). When Hafez al-Asad died in 2000, he was succeeded by his son Bashar as president.

"Glory Days": Syrian Narratives of History

As informative as such a backdrop is, examining narrations of history is actually far more useful for my task—though seeing where and how they line up with the 'textbook' versions can provide insights as well.⁴⁰ More than this, however, speaking about history has great implications for the present and how people position other actors or groups in the narration in relation to themselves (c.f. Alonso 1994:387). Thus, even 'doing' (via relating) history can be a way of doing social relations, creating insiders and outsiders and making connections. Gilsenan (1996:296) found a similar pattern in narratives of personal history in Lebanon, specifically from one informant describing his past: "What my friend was doing in repeating his stories was to constitute his own *ta'rikh* and *sira* (history and biography). *The two narratives were not about a past, but about his powers in a constantly acted-upon present*" (my emphasis). Gilsenan's observation equally applies to a realm of broader

⁴⁰ Though this may tell us more about ourselves than our informants, in seeing where and why we would expect things to be present in a 'history,' where they might diverge from what our informants would expect, and what *these* gaps might indicate.

social relations, where the focus is not only on *personal* history recreating the present, but on how groupness and collective identity is produced and reproduced in the present using popular⁴¹ historical narrations. While individual narrations might vary from one person or day to the next, their general form was often the same: the progression from an idyllic (if not wholly perfect) past through a phase of shattering, ultimately resulting in a world of *official* fragmentation. My informants decried and condemned these divisions, despite their own description of the different categories of people living in the region of Syria. The primary differences seem to be that the official version did not necessarily match the ‘natural’ divides and thus were artificial, and that one was *imposed* upon the population and not something that people adopted and lived themselves.

As I mentioned above, in Damascenes’ narrations, history began with the Ottomans. Interestingly, the rhetoric here was not of a ‘foreign power,’ but a set of leaders who united the entire Bilad al-Sham under the common flag of Islam.⁴² The narrated history described how, in those times, there were no identity conflicts; all people were part of a holistic entity that did not discriminate or draw arbitrary lines between neighbors. The only distinctions between people were city- or village-based ones—whether you were from Damascus or Beirut or some little-known town, far-removed from the sophisticated centers of urban life.⁴³ Even relations with people of other faiths, my Muslim informants assured me, were relaxed—there was no persecution of them; they were allowed and encouraged to practice their religion and peacefully co-exist with everyone else. The presentation was a picture of harmony, freedom and tolerance. Though further back in time and not usually included as part of the historical narration, a similar image was occasionally reiterated in stories of Salah al-Din—the man who halted the European, Christian invaders. Kurdish friends especially (and perhaps ironically given the current tensions with the Kurdish

⁴¹ I wish to stress the popular nature of these histories, as they can vary quite strongly from those which (I heard) are represented by the official domain, especially in such places as primary school texts.

⁴² The conversations that emphasized Islam as a unifying factor were invariably those I had with Muslim informants. Similar conversations with Christians often did not begin with the Ottomans, or did not emphasize (or positively portray) the religious factor.

⁴³ It should be noted that all my informants were city-folk in that they had lived all or much of their lives in Damascus.

community in the region more broadly) were proud of the fact that Salah al-Din, despite being Kurdish, created and maintained an *Islamic* empire, one that would neither exclude people nor create rigid social divisions. He could have created a *Kurdish* world. But he did not precisely because there was no sense of Kurdish identity as being an important issue—it simply did not matter.⁴⁴ Ottoman rule had maintained such an identity (problem)-free world. Again, given the *millet* system, we can see that it was not a world devoid of distinctions between people, but rather was described as one that was without *problematic* divisions.

Which is not to say that everything was ideal. The Ottomans were also known for their vicious methods of putting people to death (*khazu*—sliding people onto a sharpened pole from the groin to the head—was a popular one); their ‘Wall of Heads,’ composed of the heads of those who had contested Ottoman power; and their hoarding of gold while only a select few local families prospered. However, this negative side of their rule often only came up in very specific moments. For instance, informants would relate such things to me when we were sight-seeing and came across a memorable monument, or when they were explaining the origins of a particular common phrase (as *khazu* has become, indicating being in an uncomfortable position for a long period of time, such as an airplane ride). In contrast to that, descriptions of Ottoman rule as a positive, unifying era of history could come up in conversation at any moment. It could be presented as history, but it was also regularly brought up in seemingly unrelated political, religious and identity conversations concerning the present. In these settings it was, among other things, a dramatic comparison that served to emphasize the (structurally) divisive nature of society since the time of the French and British occupations of the Arab Middle East.

The primary difference between this history and the description of Ottoman history presented previously is that the narrated version is much shorter. It does not delve into the various conflicts and divisions within the Ottoman Empire, nor the fact that the empire was breaking up from the inside before the end of World War I.

⁴⁴ Alexis deTocqueville (2003:700-702) argued that “equality naturally divides” people into small groups because they have no officially designated pre-eminence over each other and thus tend to divide along “artificial and arbitrary” lines to try and distinguish themselves from the masses. However, in cases of aristocracy where there are institutional divides in place, people already know who they are and do not have to distinguish themselves in other ways. Taken in this light, the Ottoman *millet* system pre-created the divides between people, thus making other (i.e. identity) issues of no concern.

There are certainly parallels in the ways that both sets of narrators emphasized the harmony within the region under Ottoman control, but for my informants, that was where the importance ended. If narrations of history are indeed not (just) about the course of events in the past, but are also an act of addressing the present, then in emphasizing only the unity of the Ottoman era, what Syrians were *doing* was engaging with today's international politics. The Ottomans no longer exist as such (though it would be interesting to see how the narrations would change if they did). What does exist in the physical space that the empire occupied is a series of much smaller countries, determined by lines on maps that the occupants of that space had no real hand in drawing. It is perhaps this lack of involvement that makes the divisions perceived as artificial.

In saying that the Ottoman days were so wonderful, Syrians were also saying that today is less so, *because* there is no longer the same sense of potential unity, thus imbuing the narrations with an implicit moral commentary as well. What, or rather who destroyed that unity? The French and the British governments. The Ottomans may have been outsiders, but at least they had a commonality in being from the same region and sharing a common religious tradition with the majority of people (Islam). They were therefore narrated in these instances as being, at least partially, 'insiders.' The Europeans, on the other hand, were much more 'foreign,' i.e. very 'outside.' And these countries still exist today, meaning that the narrative othering taking place applied not only to historical Britain and France, but to these peoples and countries as they exist today as well. The positioning of the French and British as outsiders in a historical mode, did precisely the same thing for them in a current one. There was and always has been, these narrations assert (and thus create), an unbridgeable gap between the British and the French and (some form of) 'Us.'

For there was an 'Us' being created here that was not limited to Syrians living within the modern borders of Syria, but included all the people of this region who formerly lived as one people and were forever divided by colonial powers. Speaking of the unity-that-was was a way to generate a regional sense of identity, a common 'group' that theoretically does not exclude any of the region's *original* inhabitants (thus externalizing the recently-arrived Jewish-Israeli population). But at the same time, the narrators were knowingly situating such a unified identity in the past. It

was a glorious past, but the reality was that the world had moved on. Without explicitly saying it—or even directly hinting at it—in invoking a unified history, Syrians were emphasizing the fact that it no longer existed. They were quietly acknowledging that, even if it was not their fault, the lines were drawn and what was (remembered as) a single field is no longer so. And, vis-à-vis the tacit acknowledgement of their existence, these divisive lines were reaffirmed and recreated by the very narrations that would seem to condemn them.

The narrated histories did not, of course, stop at the end of the Ottoman Empire. However, I feel that these more recent histories are better described in terms of the ethnographic contexts in which they often came up. Before I turn to that, however, there is one last analytical point I would like to raise here: namely another discrepancy between the ‘authorized’ history and the narrated histories. The latter tend not to feature the Soviet Union in any way, despite the military connections during the mid-20th century. Instead, in Syrian post-independence (and certainly post-perestroika) narrations, America and Israel were effectively the sole external players. There is the possibility that Syrians did not really perceive the events of that era in ‘Cold War superpower light,’ but rather as a regional dispute, ultimately between Syria and Israel. The Soviets were inconsequential players in the face of Israelis as the major political, military and moral threat. America would almost naturally be included with Israel, because it had much closer and more unilateral ties with Israel than the Soviets ever did with Syria. Another possibility is that this absence may be due to the fact that the Soviets are no longer a coherent group that can be connected or related to. My informants’ narrations were *of* the present, and it has been more than ten years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Israel remains the strongest threat in the region and America is now the world’s only superpower. Again we encounter the idea that retellings of history are actions that enact the present more than the past.

Changes: Narrated Divisions and Inside/Outside

There were two specific arenas that Syrians often used to provide examples of how and why the Ottoman era was so positive and unified: movement and language. Most

obvious compared with the restrictions of today, was the freedom of movement. There were no lines on maps dividing the region into distinct realms. There may have been local, magisterial districts, but in the eyes of the people living there, these were purely administrative in nature. Ultimately, the whole of the area was part of one big country that allowed full freedom of movement to its population. There was no need of a passport to go visit one's relatives in Beirut or Amman, no official borders between family and friends living in different areas. Equally important was language and communication. Different friends told me a number of times that under the Ottoman regime, all of Bilad al-Sham spoke in one dialect of Arabic, that while there might be some local accents or inflections, the language was nearly universal. How and why these aspects changed and the results of that change were, for Syrians, indicative of larger processes at work. What had been informal and momentary (the narrated differentiation of people into groups) had become formal and permanent (official borders dividing people into reified, citizen groups).

Border Crossings

With the end of the Ottoman Empire, my Syrian informants explained, the French and the British came and carved up the entire region without any consideration for the people living there. This led to a great deal of trouble; in fact, much of the area's current troubles can be (and are) tied back to this random division of Bilad al-Sham. Lines were drawn where there had been none previously; borders (*ḥadūd*) were thrown up that restricted and continue to restrict movement.⁴⁵ As of June 2005, Syrians could cross the Lebanese border with only their Syrian identity card, but to get to Jordan, they had to have a passport. And the restrictions did not necessarily stop once one had successfully crossed the border. A group of us were traveling in Jordan, consisting of a Palestinian-Jordanian male, a brother and sister pair of Jordanians, their Syrian cousin (*ibn khālthun*), a tourist from New Zealand, and an American anthropologist. We decided to take a scenic route through the country and drive along the Dead Sea coast. When we got to the highway, we were stopped by a

⁴⁵ In a way, this process of line-drawing and the way it is described nearly prefigures my entire argument: seemingly arbitrary divisions (and between and within the divisions, inclusions) were drawn by people that resulted in the repositioning of the world.

policeman who asked to see our identification. After doing so, he said there was a problem with the Syrian. He told us that Syrian young men were prohibited from traveling along this highway without the correct permissions. The guard explained that this was actually at the Syrian government's insistence, as leaders were worried about young men trying to go visit Israel by crossing the sea. Permission from whom remained a little unclear, but the guard was fairly adamant about not letting the Syrian man through until his cousins stood surety for him (*yḏamanu ʿalayh*). He seemed dubious but was finally convinced. I was somewhat skeptical about the whole situation, but if any money changed hands, I did not see it (and I was looking).

Practically speaking, travel from one place to another within Bilad al-Sham was no longer a simple process, as Syrians insist it once was. During the time of my fieldwork, the borders were a complicated set of check-points and posts, which could be daunting for those unfamiliar with how to get through them (or how much money to 'hide' in the pages of your passport to ensure a speedier trip). For instance, crossing the Syrian-Lebanese border as a Syrian involved filling out a form bought from a nondescript corner store; handing that form and your identity card to an officer at passport control; and then passing through a security checkpoint where bored, but well-armed guards scanned through car trunks and luggage before waving you through. And there was a new feature on my third visit in June 2005 (i.e. after the Hariri bombing and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon)—an additional *mukhābarāt* (secret police) checkpoint beyond the normal one, where they wanted to review all the paperwork and cars once more. At this point you could then drive the six kilometers to the Lebanese line, where you went through a similar process of paperwork and identity checking. The whole trip from Damascus to Beirut could take anywhere from two to three hours, depending on what day you were traveling, how much traffic there was, how important you looked, and if you were familiar with and willing to engage in the bribery system. And of course, this time was extended by visits to the massive Duty Free Shop in the no-man's land⁴⁶ between the two borders, replete with imported technology, alcohol, luggage, and a full-scale grocery store. Courtesy of Rami Makhoul, whose name we will re-encounter in later chapters. A trip to Jordan was just as obstacle-ridden, though with

⁴⁶ I use this term *pace* Navaro-Yashin (2003), for I do mean it to imply a dead and uninhabited (versus unrecognized) space.

a much less impressive Duty Free store. And yet, the complications of travel notwithstanding, travelers went back and forth for business and to visit, impeded but not dissuaded by the formality of the borders.

Borders and border control have been identified and analyzed as state-driven methods of nation-building (Radcliffe 2001) and as an indication of sovereignty and authority via spatial control of people moving into and out of (Zureik 2001), or within a territory (Edwards 1998). They provide instances in which a state can create a definition for itself as well as set up a visible, symbolic, and effective instance of its authority (Donnan and Wilson 1999). The border police are the first or the last indications that one is crossing boundaries of authority, and who mans these borders and decides what laws to apply to people crossing them points to and helps to create power. However, borders can also be instances where power can be (discursively) undermined or a lack of power made obvious. In Palestine, for instance, Palestinians were responsible for supplying the guards at border checks, which would ostensibly have implied that they had a measure of power. The reality however, was that they had nothing more than an image of authority, which was undermined by the well-known secret that there were Israeli guards posted out of sight who actually authorized anything the Palestinians ‘decided’ (Zureik 2001).

In Syria, these seemingly invisible processes of power consolidation were well-known phenomena. Syrians were aware of borders being a clear delineation of the government’s jurisdiction, though as the case of the Syrian in Jordan, sometimes that jurisdiction could extend beyond the official boundary-line. In terms of these narrations, what ‘happened’ was that several external powers came into a formerly idyllic and unified territory and began to arbitrarily draw lines on a map. Authority has a place here, in that my Syrian informants did not feel that these Europeans had the authority to do what they did without input from the people within those borders. But they did it regardless, and as a result people in Damascus had come to face previously non-existent complications when trying to visit family in Amman. Again we see that while the Ottomans may not have been identical to the people living in the area that is now Syria, at least they were perceived as being closer than the

new(ish) intruders.⁴⁷ On a very basic level, then, what such narrations of history did in the present was to create a division between the ‘European’ world and, by proxy, most of the Arabic-speaking world (as colonization took place more than just in Bilad al-Sham).⁴⁸ This process, as identity-making often does, has both connective and disconnective effects. The ‘Arab World’⁴⁹ was (momentarily) created as a somewhat-bounded and unified group that has come to exist in contrast⁵⁰ to a ‘Europe.’ Sham is the closest of those inside, because people could and regularly did trace out and maintain family lines across the area, making these connections not only ‘conceptual’ but also ‘inter-personal’ (Strathern 2005). So, narrations-as-doing-relations made connections with other colonized Arabs, and disconnections from European powers. The latter were (re)created as ‘foreigners’ (*ijānib*).

There were further complications surrounding the border issue in Syria, making it that much more difficult to determine who might have been inside or outside, even in a strictly political-geography sense. While I was looking at a Syrian-made map of Syria, I saw two areas of contested space. One was the area along the border of Turkey that France gave to Turkey during the Mandate era. On the map, the area was marked out as *ḥadūd mu’uqaṭah* (temporary borders), despite the fact that the territory had not belonged to Syria at any point in its independent period. The other area of contestation was the Golan Heights (*al-jolān*). This space was not even delineated by a temporary border; rather, the whole of the Golan was included within Syria’s *ḥadūd dawliyah* (state borders). Even in ‘official’ and seemingly permanent divisions between people, there were discrepancies and flexibility. But while permanence seemed to be the hallmark of the ‘state’ (i.e. the temporary border presents a challenge to it and the occupied territory is portrayed as permanent), it was this very insistence on rigidity that was disagreeable to the people living there. What existed under the Ottomans was a broad field that people themselves could define

⁴⁷ I am choosing here to overlook long European presence in the region. For instance, no one every brought the Crusades up unless speaking about Salah al-Din and his ability to unify the region (or unless I specifically asked). Even then, the Europeans were only in the story by proxy, not as a focus.

⁴⁸ There is the potential for an inclusion of all post-colonial societies here, but I take the lead of my informants who would consider Indians, East Asians, South Americans, and the rest as distant (if not more so) from themselves as Europeans.

⁴⁹ Cf. Navaro-Yashin (2002:73-74) for a critique on the *anthropological* use of such regional terminology.

⁵⁰ ‘Opposition’ might seem to be the obvious word to use here, rather than contrast. However, I avoid it because I wish to avoid putting any sense of this being an ‘active,’ clash-of-cultures sort of opposition.

and divide in momentary “flashes” (Navaro-Yashin 2002). But in both cases, the importance seemed to lie with who has the authority (or ability) to draw the lines.

Language

The break-up of the unified world of Sham was not limited to big governmental processes such as redrawing maps. Though my informants decried the European division of the region and the subsequent emergence of groups of ‘locals’ that eagerly stepped in to perpetuate the divisions (i.e. past and current national governments), they too would actually momentarily separate themselves from others with narrations on language itself.⁵¹ One of the clearest examples of this was the way in which people spoke of Arabic speakers from North Africa. One professional, upper middle class informant told me that she had been to a meeting between various officials in the Arabic speaking world. However, when she met someone from Morocco, they had to converse in English because they could not understand each other’s Arabic. My informant just shook her head, bewildered at how “strange” (*gharīb*) and “different” (*mukhtilifīn*) they were. And though everyone understood the Egyptian dialect, that was, they assured me, only because Egypt had the largest Middle Eastern film industry. Thus, this discourse on language almost immediately challenged the integrity of any ‘inside’ that would claim to hold all ‘Arabs’ equally. North Africans might be Arabs, but they were also external, because without the use of a foreign tongue or the mediating influence of the film industry, people from the two areas could not necessarily communicate. In some moments, then, North Africans were created as insiders (as Arabs), but were also narrated as being different. And while in the process of creating a Them, the same process affirmed a more select sense of Us in contrast. Neither grouping (as all insiders or as sets of insiders and outsiders) superceded the other, and both creations were momentary, needing to be constantly (re)created by narrations to obtain the *effect* of permanence.

Contrast this approach to Ortner’s (1995), where she urges anthropologists to look *within* (resistance) groups for, what are effectively, sub-groups and divisions

⁵¹ Cf. Haeri (1997) on language’s appropriation as a symbolic capital of the state in Egypt.

within them. In doing so, she adds a scale, with the entire resistance group being at the top or the most broadly encompassing. She argues that this will reveal the ambiguities of our informants' lives.⁵² However, I would argue that applying such a scalar model to the Syrian case would be an artificial imposition. They did not necessarily see their shifting identities existing in different scales (excepting perhaps 'importance' scales which varied from person to person). And while making other people both insiders and outsiders at the same time may seem ambiguous, it is only so for the (already self-externalized) researcher. We read multiple meanings into their narrations and look to isolate them in the hopes of transforming an uncertain observation into a clear interpretation of one thing or the other. But there was nothing grey about this for my informants—they comfortably and rapidly switched between and engaged simultaneously (what we see as) multiple meanings (blacks and whites, to complete the metaphor). Or, to change metaphors, if people were dots, then there could be lines drawn that join two dots (connections) as well as lines drawn that divide the same dots (disconnections). Indeed, the same narrations could do both. And there was nothing uncertain or ambiguous about that to my informants.

Such linguistic divisions were also at work closer to home, though it was more often a case of differing accents rather than dialects. As I mentioned, one of the common refrains I heard when people were speaking of their Ottoman history was that there was once no real distinction between the spoken Arabic language throughout Bilad al-Sham. Now, however, people have developed a degree of pride in the regional differences between their spoken dialects (*ʿāmīya*'s). Making fun of the way that other people, especially in other countries, spoke was a regular pastime, and always ended with the assertion that Shami (Damascene Arabic) was the best. As a foreigner intent on learning the *ʿāmīya* over standard Arabic, it often took me some time to get adjusted to how people from outside Damascus spoke, and sometimes my Syrian friends had similar difficulties. Accents had become a ready way to determine where someone was from, even within Damascus. Immigrants to Syria from other countries were easily recognizable by their speech and would be treated accordingly (e.g. Saudis who were likely to buy a lot and tip well might have received better

⁵² Donnan and Wilson (1999:13) suggest a similar idea, saying that "international borders highlight ambiguities of identity." I suggest that, in the Syrian case, the ambiguity is on the part of the researcher, not Syrians.

service in some restaurants, but equally might have been snubbed for being Saudi). And the accent was not something that could always be easily faked—an Iraqi friend said that while he could have passed as Lebanese pretty early on, it had taken him ten years to be able to speak like a Damascene and even now it was sometimes difficult.

So, (re)tracing and reinforcing the political lines of the ‘artificial’ borders, there has developed a differentiation between the various *‘āmīya*’s, and people enjoy poking fun at others. But in a reflexive moment, one informant told me:

We all talk in different ways now and that is because we are different countries. It is sad that we believe we are so different now, that there *are* differences between us that weren’t always there. It is because the foreigners separated us and none of the ‘sons of bitches’ (*ibnā’ sharamīt*) in power want to give that power up, which would be necessary if we all got together again like it used to be. So they have said that we are not the same and now we are forgetting the old days and have started to believe them.

Language differentiation, then, was an indication that people were beginning to think of themselves as Syrian or Iraqi or Jordanian, whereas 100 years ago, (supposedly) there would have been no fixed differentiation and no one would have seen themselves as belonging to such categories. But the process of separation into distinct states was so effective that people became proud of their (newly created and thus ‘artificial’) differences. When I visited Jordan, I was asked if I spoke Arabic. I laughed and said that I spoke Shami. My Damascene friend gave a huge laugh, patted me on the shoulder, and said “That was a perfect answer.”

It is, of course, difficult to verify what, if any, differences there were in spoken versions of Arabic throughout the region in the time of the Ottomans. But regardless of the historical validity of their narrations, what is central is that Syrians (and people from throughout the region) frequently brought up *‘āmīya* in conversation and just as regularly derided other ways of speaking Arabic. But they were reflexive enough to understand that language, as such, had become a key point in the creation (or affirmation) of new identities, a fact that they were not always comfortable with. The theme that was implicitly repeated here was that the ‘sons of bitches’ in power had no right to foster a sense of difference in the people throughout the Bilad al-Sham region, especially since it was for no other purpose than their own gain. There was a critique here as well, a quiet challenge to the legitimacy of the

regimes that existed at the expense of the ‘natural’ unity of the larger population (see Chapter 4). And in this, they were returned to the issues of artificial borders and reminded of the role that foreign intrusions into their world had to play in this.

External Figures in Syria Today

Media: A Window to the Outside

Above are outlined a variety of ways in which, historically and narratively, the international world has appeared inside the boundaries of Syria. However, much of this tended to revolve around ‘big politics’ and therefore does not necessarily apply to the ways individuals interacted with the international in the course of their everyday lives. But people, not just governments, engaged with and felt connected to the world beyond Syria. Some of the experiences were first-hand, such as when Syrians married a foreigner, worked or studied abroad, or had businesses that took them to other countries, though these opportunities were generally only available to the mid- to upper-classes. However, there are other modes of engagement that are more widely available, with the Media being one of the primary ones. While some Syrians I spoke to sought to make the Media a two-way exchange of culture between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ until now it has remained a one-way window, giving Syrians (and people from this area more broadly) an insight into Western life. But as such, it gives Syrians the opportunity to engage in observation and comparative analysis to try and make sense of the world beyond their borders. From news to fashion to pop music, I observed Syrians availing themselves of a number of media technologies to get a glimpse and understanding of (what becomes (re)constructed as) the ‘other side.’

One of the most traditional and longest-term sources of such information is print media. There are many different daily newspapers printed in Syria, most in Arabic, but some in English as well. For the most part, these detail political and social life in Syria and often have pages devoted to housing and job advertisements. However, one counterpoint to the monochrome papers is the colorful and immensely popular high-life magazine *Layalina*. *Layalina* is issued monthly (though you never know which month’s issue you will find when purchasing one from a newsstand), and as of 2005, is now being printed in English in addition to Arabic. It is almost

solely devoted to picture collages about the goings-on of the rich and famous, reviewing the biggest and best weddings in Damascus, parties for ambassadors, restaurant openings, fashion shows, and the like. There is also a large section where the magazine's photographers go around to restaurants and nightclubs and take pictures of the clientele (most of whom are middle to upper middle class), which the readers will then set about perusing, looking to catch sight of themselves or someone they know.⁵³ However, *Layalina* also contains articles about the world beyond Syria, sometimes via foreign recipes or interviews with prominent foreigners in the Syrian community. One issue also included an interview with Jennifer Lopez and a six-page section called '*Layalina Airlines*' about the history of and modern life in Canada.

Another technology of experiencing the Western world—one that is rapidly gaining in popularity—is the internet. Most of the tourist guidebooks on Syria (for example *Lonely Planet Syria* and *Footprints Syria and Lebanon*, published in 1999 and 2001 respectively) assure the traveler that there are virtually no internet cafes in Syria. However, by 2004, this had drastically changed—there were at least five within a ten-minute walking distance of my house in the Old City. And while many of these catered to foreigners, the clientele would often include just as many Syrians (mostly in their late teens to early 20's, many of them university students) as non-Syrians, checking e-mail, chatting on instant messenger, or just surfing. While there are a wide number of Arabic websites, most of these people would have e-mail accounts and messenger programs running in English, even when speaking to other Arabic speakers. E-mail especially is regularly used to pass on cute little pictures of love and friendship, or jokes of all kinds, from toilet humor to political cartoons, often centered around various international political figures. And while some people relied on public cafes for their internet access, it was becoming more common to see it in people's homes as well. It was much slower and more expensive than connection in the cafes, but despite that, no small number of my middle-class friends had signed up for it (or were getting it illegally by using a shared log-in and password). And towards mid-2005, I saw a billboard advertisement showing several young men and

⁵³ And this is not limited to women, as one might expect. I had three separate male friends approach me and tell me when I had apparently shown up in one of the issues, much to my surprise. Though much of this may have been limited to the middle class ranges; for these would be the people most likely to spot themselves or someone they knew in the picture section.

women sitting in front of a computer and smiling, announcing the plan to have internet available to everyone in the near, if unspecified, future. While internet ostensibly provides more than unidirectional access to other people, there were many more Syrians who read and used sites written by and for Westerners than there were Westerners logging on to sites written by Syrians. One partial exception to this is Joshua Landis' site SyriaComment. He is an American professor (hence it is a partial exception) from the University of Oklahoma who runs a well-known blog where he posts current events in Syria. Though in English, Syrians are welcome and encouraged to post their responses on it, creating a space for dialogue.

However, internet and print media notwithstanding, the most popular mode of access to the rest of the world by far was satellite television. From Al-Jazeera and BBC news to Rotana music videos and Channel 4 movies, satellite plays a substantial role in everyday life. Nearly every house in the city and many small business shops had a television set up with a satellite box attached. Five years ago, owning a satellite dish would have been enough to get a person fined, if not jailed. Which is not to say that people did not have them anyway; they were just well hidden (see section on the secret police in Chapter 5). But now they have been legalized, so there is no more need to hide them under sheets during the day. The current difficulty is trying to get the codes to unlock the various different channels without paying the international (and therefore expensive) rates. For about 200 lira (approximately \$4) every couple of months, Syrians would purchase a card from a local dealer that provides hundreds of channels, including stations from Egypt, the Gulf, Turkey, and Europe. In the home, televisions are run almost constantly in the background, whether or not anyone is even in the room paying them the least bit of attention. Music videos are quite common for such backdrop noise, usually Arabic pop artists, though occasionally with an American song in the line-up.⁵⁴

But it is news and Western television and movie programs that allow Syrians a 'real' glimpse into Western life (*ḥayāt gharabīyah*). Al-Jazeera occasionally provides a Middle Eastern view of the Western world, while Saudi-based (though rumored by Syrians to be American-funded) al-Arabiya gives a more Western-

⁵⁴ It is not at all unusual to see 'Eminem' scrawled on walls throughout the city—he is so popular that one Syrian friend asked me to transcribe his lyrics for her so that she could understand what he was saying.

oriented perspective. The BBC channel is in English, but such high-class venues as the Health Club (Salamandra 2004 describes this club in some detail) regularly played it on one of their three television screens. More popular still were the American television and movie channels that convey a more ‘cultural’ (*seqāfī*) image, especially of the United States. Oprah Winfrey is on every day, as are a number of soap operas—they do not have a chance of edging out the local Ramadan mini-series, but have large numbers of faithful devotees throughout the rest of the year. There are children’s cartoons (both American and French) dubbed into Arabic. And there is Channel 4, which plays nothing but Hollywood movies 24 hours a day. One of the most popular films, judging by how frequently it is repeated and how many people reference it in everyday conversation was *The Godfather*. (Indeed, I remember one evening spent sitting in a café in the Old City with the entire place spellbound as this movie played on the satellite TV overhead.) Such movies had an impact on Syrian perceptions of America—I was asked time and again by Syrian friends how difficult it was to live under a massive Mafia crime scene and the violence, drugs, and murder that were involved in such a regime. Despite my protests, they assured me they knew that was how things were in America.

Television, and these various media more generally, allow Syrians to get a sense of what is happening in the rest of the world and to generate an image of that world according to their own observation of it. Through such observation, they come to know the rest of the world, and are able to make comparisons between what they see there and what they live in the course of their own lives. The differences become apparent to them, enabling them to speak of (and thereby recreate) the Western world as something distinct from themselves. Syrians can see, laid out side-by-side, how Canadian cultural life is sharply distinct from Damascene high life. The window, then, can also be a door, from which Syrians take material that they can use to draw the lines of inside and outside. This process holds true not only for Westerners, but for other Arabs as well, as mini-series (*muselselāt*) and films from Egypt and the Gulf show how similar or different life can be there, too. These windows, then, provide ways of seeing, making, and thus knowing the world.

International Presence Inside Syria

The Media may provide a window into the international world, but Syrians also have other, direct experiences of foreigners living in and visiting Syria. Historically, *ijānib* (foreigners) were indications, when not the actual bringers, of problems in Syria. They brought economic complications in Ottoman times, carved up Bilad al-Sham into colonial-like territories, entwined Syria in international power games, and involved themselves in maintaining unpopular, dictatorial regimes. However, these stories and histories mainly deal with Western powers, not other countries in the Arab world, nor those further east in Asia. But people from these other countries are also present in Syria and provide another way to consider the process of connecting and disconnecting. Syrian narrations of their experiences with various outsiders call into the question what is meant by ‘foreigner,’ who is narrated as external to *Syrians* (in contrast to the relatively bounded space of ‘Syria’), and why. The borders between social categories are revealed to be much more fluid than those between countries. And, if even lines on maps can be impermanent, then what might that say about lines amongst the people living in the areas on the maps? We are returned, then, to many of the ideas brought up in the identity section of the introduction, including the shifting, narrated quality of connections and disconnections between people.

Before attempting to look at the place of outsider Arabs in Syria, it is worth briefly noting how Syrians experience other, non-Arab, non-Western foreigners. These are the outsiders who were most likely to be described in Syria as *ijānib*, along with people of American (North or South) or European origin, i.e. the people most consistently (re)created as outsiders. One of the most obvious instances of this was the Filipino worker. There were a number of agencies that worked between the Philippines and Syria to contract women from the former to work as house maids and servants in the latter for a period of usually two to three years. These young women could often be seen walking with their employers, juggling children and shopping bags, and often wearing *hijāb*. Sometimes in the evening, they would take strolls through the city parks together in their break hours. Only Syrians in the upper echelons of society could afford to ‘have’ a Filipino girl in their house, as they were responsible for paying the girl’s wages, as well as visas and plane tickets. Having a

Filipino girl was a mark of prestige—for instance, while sitting in a fancy, but popular restaurant, I was astonished to note that some of the families had brought their maids with them. A friend of mine scoffed and assured me it had nothing to do with giving the girl a day out and everything to do with showing off their wealth to the rest of the restaurant's clientele. Despite the close working and living arrangements, there was no love lost between Filipino employee and Syrian employer. Accusations of lying, theft, and sexual abuse/promiscuity were regularly exchanged on both sides. Syrians described these girls as poor, desperate, and lacking in appropriate moral behavior, setting them firmly as outsiders.

While the vast majority of Syrians did not employ foreign workers in their homes, the idea worked its way through the levels of society that these East Asians were not trustworthy and not like 'Us.' These foreigners were almost viewed as second-class humans, a belief not aided by the number of East Asians working in the streets, selling collections of cheap trinkets and clothing. This perception of East Asians had the unfortunate side effect of spilling over onto *all* people of East Asian origin. One way to call someone stupid was to call them 'Mongolian' (*mongoli*) and China was seen as a backwards and uncivilized place (see joke, pg. 125). This stereotyping made it difficult for foreigners from this area of the world traveling or studying in Syria—it was quite a scandal when one of my informant's uncles married a Thai woman. Similarly, people of darker skin, mostly Africans, were generally stereotyped as being thieves and criminals and are still associated with slavery (though it is unclear in most people's minds how much slavery existed in the history of the region). One English teacher (British, but of Arab descent) asked his students if they knew what a slave was. A common answer was, "black men." There were not many people with very dark complexions in Syria, and the few there were tended to be refugees from Sub-Saharan countries and far too frequently fit the bill of untrustworthy foreigners. The exceptions to this were the African-American basketball players that were hired to play on the Syrian basketball team, but they were usually well-distinguishable by their tall, athletic physique and their expensive, trendy clothing (they were still outsiders, but closer to Syrians than the African outsiders). In a sense, these East Asian and African foreigners were made to be *more* foreign than Europeans or Americans. Though narrations of Euro-Americans were

often negative in tone, at least there was a degree of historical connections between the areas—it was not uncommon for middle class Syrians to speak French, English or, increasingly, Spanish. There were points of connection amidst the disconnections. In contrast, there was (perceived) to be a lot less connection with the populations of countries further east or south, making for a greater distance and positioning them as more external to ‘Syrians.’

Ultimately, though, Syrians’ reactions to such distant foreigners usually involved an off-hand disdain or dismissal. However, Syrian feelings towards people from other Muslim and Arab countries tended to be much more heated and emotional. The initial reaction whenever discussing non-Syrian Arabic or Muslim populations (especially in front of an American foreigner) was to make claims of brotherhood and solidarity, such as “We stand by Palestine because they are our Arab brothers!” or “Our Islamic brethren in Iran will show Bush a thing or two!” But the further Syrians proceeded into such conversations, the more these declarations of association broke down. In describing other Arabic populations, my informants came out with what amounted to: “Palestinians are not nice people. Iraqis are not nice people. Kuwaitis are not nice people. Libyans are not nice people. And even Syrians are not nice people.” While this left me wondering who *were* nice people, it also illuminated a sense of distance between countries that are frequently considered (by outsiders and sometimes insiders) to be bastions of solidarity.⁵⁵ Iran, for instance, was viewed with pride as a force to be reckoned with, politically and militarily, but the constant Iranian presence in Damascus (home to a number of Shi’a pilgrimage sites) coupled with Iranian tourists’ inability to speak either Arabic or English generally made them a point of frustration in Syrians’ everyday lives.

In fact, the only petty crime I witnessed in Syria happened at one of these sites—a mosque built to honor Seida Zeinab, the prophet Muhammed’s grand-daughter. In the course of an hour, two other girls with me—one a Syrian—had mobile phones stolen out of their pockets, one of which was stolen in the shrine itself. As I entered the shrine, a Syrian woman (by her accent) warned me to hold on to all of my things, because there was a lot of theft taking place. Funnily enough, she

⁵⁵ Though the inability of the Arab League to come to any sort of agreement on anything has been well-documented.

only noticed me because her young daughter had looked up at me and asked “*ijnabīyah?*” to which I laughed and responded “*eh, ana ijnabīyah*” (yeah, I’m a foreigner). Two things struck me in that moment. One was that a girl of perhaps five years, knew the word for ‘foreigner.’ It would seem that the doing of identity and narrating foreign-ness was so explicit that even young children picked up on it. Secondly, I found it interesting that a Syrian woman would warn a ‘foreigner’ about the danger of theft from other ‘foreigners.’ That I understood Arabic was certainly a factor, for it made me somewhat less of an outsider than the other foreigners who were stealing and did not understand Arabic. The lines of who was inside and who was outside in this moment were certainly ‘ambiguous’ (from the anthropologist’s perspective). This Syrian woman, through her helpful warning, was distancing herself from the Iranians (i.e. thieves) and was connecting with me as potential victim of the other outsiders. But, she was also constructing me as an outsider, a foreigner who would benefit from her local (insider) advice. A single warning, one action, effected (at least) three temporary connections or disconnections. But then we parted ways and the moment ended, as did the dis/connections with it.

Iraqis

Despite being a big draw for Iranian tourists, the area of Seida Zeinab is mostly populated with expatriates from Iraq—another problematic category of people in Syria. While Syrians professed outrage at the American invasion of and continued involvement in Iraq, they were not pleased with the massive surge of Iraqi refugees entering into Syria. In the way that Syrians talked about them, there was a sense of “They are our cousins, but we would really prefer if they stayed in their house next door rather than moving into ours.” Part of the problem were Syrians’ impressions that large numbers of the Iraqi population taking up residence in Damascus were the lowest of the low, sweeping into an area en masse and ruining it. For instance, it was not uncommon to run across Iraqi prostitutes, identifiable by their skin-tight and “tastelessly” (*ma lau ta^cmeh*) low-cut clothing (versus the high society Damascene women who might wear similarly revealing, but more ‘classy’ clothing) and their harsh Iraqi *āmiya*. They could be seen anywhere from private functions—where

older family members such as mothers, aunts, and uncles acted as madams and overseers—to strolling through the gold *sūq*, looking to buy and sell gold or to attract a wealthy gold merchant.⁵⁶ The general Syrian opinion, then, was that most of the Iraqis that came to Syria were from the prostitute/criminal/drug-dealer sectors of society. It was difficult to determine the accuracy of these statements, but via their narrations Syrians positioned their Iraqi neighbors into these categories, thereby creating both a national and a *moral* distance between themselves and the Iraqi ‘outsiders.’

One of the effects that this influx was said to have had was that neighborhoods that were once nice have fallen into ruin. A friend of mine lived in a largely run-down, lower-middle class area on the edge of Damascus called Jeramana. He told me that it used to be a beautiful area, a safe neighborhood with friendly people, a good place to raise children. However, he told me, in the past couple of years, it was overrun by Iraqis and “went to hell” as a result. It is not that he witnessed his neighbors doing anything illegal, but his everyday experiences with them left him with a bad impression:

They’re very inconsiderate, they are stupid people (*jadbān*) who don’t think and don’t care about the people they live with. Some Iraqi neighbors of mine were trying to set up a chimney for themselves, but were idiots and while they were putting up theirs, they broke mine, and then they didn’t even tell me about it or help fix it. Another day the same group was cleaning their chimney and were so cheap and stingy (*bakhīl*—quite a negative and disapproving term) that they decided to do it themselves rather than hire a professional, even when they don’t know anything about cleaning chimneys. And then they were so stupid that they cleaned out *my* chimney, but there were no bags set up in my house to catch the soot and so I woke up one morning and my house was covered in black powder. And they didn’t stop when it didn’t seem to be working in their house, but continued going and covered my house more than once. My wife is pregnant, she got very upset and started crying because *she* had to clean up the house because of their idiocy. And they didn’t help. One even yelled at her for crying when it was *their* fault (*zanbhun*)!

These examples were, he told me, indicative of Iraqis in general. This friend’s sister also assured me that she was nervous to go visit her brother in Jeramana. When she would go, she would drive the long way, going around most of the area on the

⁵⁶ Iraqis, though, are by no means the only variety of prostitutes in Syria. Moroccan, Egyptian, and Russian women are the other common nationalities, with the first two generally being employed by gentlemen’s clubs and the last more often free-lancing in more popular night clubs.

highway and entering it only at the very last minute. She would prefer to add an extra 15-20 minutes onto her trip rather than take the shorter route that went through the neighborhood.

The rapid increase of Iraqis (along with other outsiders) has also involved them buying up large amounts of property within Damascus. The swelling of the buyers' market has resulted in driving up prices of housing to an almost unaffordable level. Middle and lower-middle class Syrians looking to upgrade into a nicer house suddenly find themselves unable to do so. The situation is even worse for young men looking to marry and start a family—the majority of them cannot hope to afford the massively inflated prices of homes without years of work first.

Such a situation hardly seems to be limited to Syria. The world over, concerns about immigrants have often been centered around the loss of jobs, the degradation of living areas, and the inflation of living costs. Similar narrations of frustration and resentment are nearly universal in these cases, especially amongst the working classes. The newcomers are stigmatized and figured as outsiders. However, what strikes me as somewhat different about the Syrian case is that such narrations of division exist alongside others of connection. Iraqis, as Arabs and Muslims, are also narrated as being insiders—indeed, they are directly described as being family! Two points of interest arise out of this; one is that we see again how the narrative process can create both connections with and disconnections from the same people. However, this use of both (associative) kinship labels *and* disconnective narrations implies that processes of doing kinship might be as problematic (for the anthropologist) as identity-work. There may be a 'darker' (i.e. disconnective) side to kinship as well, a thought I shall return to in Chapter 7.

Palestinians

Iraqis are not the only focus of this duplexitous Syrian positioning—Palestinians, too, occupy a similar position. There is not nearly as large a Palestinian population in Syria as in Jordan, but they are present nevertheless. A middle class woman living in a relatively affluent area of the New City told me that literally half a block down her street was a HAMAS headquarters. For obvious reasons, I never went and asked, but the *mukhābarāt* headquarters at the other end of the street may have been an

indication that she was correct. When discussing the Palestinian situation, Syrians' first reaction was often to curse the Zionists for driving the poor Arabs out of their homes. But relatively little probing brought people to reflect on how it was partially the Palestinians' fault for being greedy in the first place and selling their land to the Zionists at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. And now they are said to take up space in other countries and expect people to pander to them and their cause, making economic (vis-à-vis further contributions to the housing situation) and political problems for the hosts. But one informant told me that while most Syrians and their regime would like to get rid of the Palestinians in Syria, any overt action against the Palestinians, could lead to a war. Memories of the 1970 war between the PLO and King Hussein in Jordan (a war into which Syria entered on behalf of the Palestinians) provide historical support for how things could go wrong. It is not so much that the Syrians wish to aid Israel, as that they want an end to the problems that Palestine make for them, even if unintentionally. Like Iraqis, Palestinians are narrated as both insiders and outsiders.

Saudi Arabians

Some of the most bitter Syrian feelings towards the population of another Arab country were those directed against Saudi Arabians. In fact, throughout my fieldwork, I cannot recall a single time Saudi Arabia was brought up where it did not generate anger or disgust. This emotion sometimes extended to other Gulf states, but was mostly concentrated against the Saudis. Here the resentment was largely economically-based. It was said that the richest of Saudis buy summer homes in America and throughout Europe, but middle class Saudis (still far richer than their Syrian counterparts) would come to Damascus and Beirut, buy up the best property, and flaunt their wealth. There was a Saudi presence within Damascus throughout the year, but during the summer months their numbers jumped significantly. When walking down the street, all the best cars, Mercedes, BMW's, American-make SUV's, and basically any car that seemed to be shiny and new almost inevitably had a Saudi license plate. One could spot a Saudi family from some distance away as it usually involved one white-robed man with a white head cloth followed by a train of half a dozen or so black-covered women. The donning of *hijāb* is common in Syria,

though frequently involves only covering the hair and wearing concealing, if fashionable (*moda*), clothing. The Saudi women, in contrast, were fully covered, with no hands showing and not even eye-slits on their face coverings. Tellingly, such groups were often to be seen stopped around the city's various ATM's. Syrians' reactions to them got to be fairly predictable, involving, at the least, disgusted shakes of heads and mutterings under the breath, when not outright rude hand gestures. And it was always acceptable to cut off Saudi cars while driving because, "Well, they're Saudi."

There was also a moralistic disdain towards these outsiders:

They make everyone think they are so devout and religious. But they come and show off their money, and everyone knows that their women would be the first to throw off their veils and the rest of their clothes given the chance.⁵⁷ The men are a bunch of hypocrites who come here to drink and womanize.

I was assured that Damascus' gentlemen's clubs catered almost solely to Saudi clients, who would come and throw massive amounts of money into dancers and alcohol. The business at these places all but died in the winter months when the Saudis were not around. And sometimes Saudi men did not come to Damascus just to watch women dancing, but to find another wife. "A man will buy his new wife a house here, take care of her financially, and come to see her every couple of months. But she will usually not go there, because he often already has a wife there." For a long time, this was an easy way for Syrian women to come into a very wealthy lifestyle, but it was more and more becoming a practice that Syrians frowned upon. The money, the hypocrisy, and the play-boy attitudes that have no regard or respect for Damascus or Syrians lead the people of Syria to resent and outright dislike their Saudi neighbors. As one informant said: "If there is one country in the world that everyone can agree to hate, it's Saudi Arabia." Saudis are usually not discussed in terms of the Arab or Muslim heritage, but those connections are present when Syrians attack Saudis on a moral stance; such insults would not be effective if the Saudis did not partially share a moral code with Syrians. However, explicit

⁵⁷ Navaro-Yashin describes a similar rhetoric of moral corruption based around women who veil in Turkish secularist discourse (2002:71). However, though Syrians might have questioned the individual practice of embodiment of virtue, they simultaneously asserted that modesty *was* a virtue that should be enacted (properly).

references to Saudi Arabians were generally very negative and disconnective, situating Saudis as outsiders as well.

Lebanese

Through these various narrative stances, Syrians distanced themselves from other neighboring or ‘Arab’ nationals. The process of this differentiating often resulted in Syrians being portrayed as somehow superior to the other party, be it morally or socially. This creation of an insider superiority became particularly obvious in the ways the Damascene middle class discussed the people of Lebanon, especially those living in the capital. There was some degree of awe in their descriptions of Lebanon itself (before the Israeli bombings and invasion in 2006)—the beauty and grandeur of Beirut; how buildings and roads were actually built; and that people loved and took care of their own city. Syrians lauded the Parisian-style refurbished downtown, the cafes and restaurants, the malls, the nightclubs.⁵⁸ Before the Hariri assassination and the subsequent tensions between the two countries, traffic between Damascus and Beirut was constantly flowing, with wealthy Damascenes going to shop or see doctors in more pricey Beirut, and Lebanese coming to Syria to take advantage of the lower prices on many kinds of goods and clothing. But (and there was always a but) it was said that while Lebanon and especially Beirut may have had the appearance of style and class, hidden beneath the glitzy façade lay a more troubled reality. The cracks showed, like the still-visible bullet holes smattered across buildings from a war over 20 years past. My informants told me that the new buildings and roads were largely funded by Gulf⁵⁹ (mainly Kuwaiti) money and one of the major highways was actually built *by* the Syrian military. While visiting Beirut, it was pointed out to me how the majesty of the Promenade butts right up against some of the poorest, most run-down areas of town. Syrians said that the Lebanese drove fancy cars and wore fashionable clothing, but lived in empty homes because they had driven themselves into massive debt to maintain the image that they were living the high

⁵⁸ This varies somewhat from the other descriptions of Lebanon that we will encounter in the section on Rafik Hariri in Chapter 3. In terms of narrating, the primary difference between the two was the context; the descriptions I have included here came up of their own accord, while those in Chapter 3 came up specifically when we were discussing Rafik Hariri and his death.

⁵⁹ Again, this is a somewhat different telling than that which we see in discussions on Hariri.

life. There is a saying in Syria that neatly compares the Syrians' perceptions of the 'personalities' of the two countries: "If you want a pretty wallflower for a wife, marry a Lebanese woman. But if you want a woman who will take care of your home, raise your children well, and be eternally loyal, marry a Syrian."

These were, in the eyes of some Syrians, the defining qualities of the Lebanese—an obsession with presentation at the expense of substance,⁶⁰ a sham of prestige to hide, even from themselves, the fact that in their collective heart, they do not know who or what they are. Lebanon, as some unified thing, is not at all unified—it is, and perhaps has been for quite some time, described as stuck in an angst-like identity crisis. In a sense Lebanon acts as a representation of the post-Ottoman Bilad al-Sham. The country was described as being what I can only call a ball of tension, a people without the ability to accept each other and live in peace. And, Syrians said, they lack a powerful enough political apparatus to *force* people to deal with their differences regardless of their moral and social inclinations to not do so (unlike Syria which was said to have a strong enough regime).⁶¹ "The Lebanese", Syrians sighed, "really just cannot take care of themselves" (*al-libnāniyīn ma biqidru yidabbaru ʿala ḥālhun abadan*). The tone of the conversations often had the sense of talking about an errant younger sibling, one that needed to be protected from him or herself. There was a fondness to the narrations, but also a lack of patience with and some scorn towards the superficiality of the situation. After Hariri died and Syrian troops left Lebanon, it was assumed in Syria that it would just be a matter of time before Lebanon eroded into one big mess again, affirmed, in Syrians' opinion, by the conflicting rallies and further bombings that took place in the following months. Afterwards, Syrians were hesitant to travel to Lebanon for any purposes, worrying that anti-Syrian sentiment might have served as the one thing to (temporarily) unite the Lebanese, and could therefore have dangerous consequences for Syrian citizens traveling there.⁶² Here too, Syrians, in talking about the problems of Lebanon, were

⁶⁰ This is a sharp contrast to the idea that morality, honor, and piety are embodied and enacted through one's appearance (Gilsenan 1996, Mahmood 2001).

⁶¹ Which is an interesting (if perhaps unintentional) reproduction of Ibn Khaldoun's (2005:107) description that "by dint of their nature, human beings need someone to act as a restraining influence and mediator in every social organization, in order to keep its members from (fighting) with each other."

⁶² Indeed, while walking near Hariri's grave in Beirut in June 2005, I came across some English graffiti on a wall, saying "Fuck you Serya" (sic).

recreating themselves as superior (perhaps less flashy but with more ‘soul’) to their neighbors, creating the Lebanese as outsiders, even when the two countries have historically and physically been very close.

* * *

These examples, then, underline how ordinary, non-politician Syrians interact with and narrate foreigners in Syria and the inhabitants of other, nearby countries. In the international realm, it indicates how Syrians feel other populations relate to them. The citizens of the U.S. and Western Europe were portrayed as strong and interfering, who were not like Syrians but were at least familiar. These were outsiders, but ones that were observable and knowable through historical remembering and current Media venues. Eastern Asians and Africans were narrated as being very external, foreign by both cultural and moral standards. Other Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners were narrated as being both insiders (especially in an ideological capacity) and outsiders (they created potential problem areas within Syria) in different moments and sometimes in the same moment. Thus, in the course of observing and narrating other countries and their populations, Syrians momentarily place these other people in relation to themselves as insiders or outsiders. At the same time, this connecting and disconnecting also serves to (re)create and define ‘Syrian’ as a category, a collection of people who are all insiders by virtue of having something in common against these outsiders. Thus, they are (re)affirming their Syrian-ness, however artificial and thus illegitimate they may also claim it to be. But it is important to bear in mind the fluidity of this whole process, the momentary-ness of the relations it creates. Without constant and continued affirmation, these lines of connection and disconnection would no longer cease to exist, practically or ideologically. Narrations that performatively place people as inside or outside can and do shift, identities do not (or perhaps, *should* not) have rigid boundaries. Unlike the newly created states who now deny people a say in the (partial) construction of their selves, narrated identity-work still allows for flows, changes, and individual agency in the production of social categorization.

3. Relating with the Outside: Narrative Position(ing)s

The previous chapter considered how explicit identity-work (through narrative creations of categories such as Lebanese, Iraqis, Europeans, etc.) served to situate other people in relation to my (Syrian) informants. However, the objects of these narrations were often people, physically or through technologies, present in Syria, where Syrians' "interpersonal" interactions with them provided examples of and a basis for (re)making more "conceptual" dis/connections (cf. Strathern 2005). In other words, abstract social categories like Iraqi or Palestinian were rendered more tangible through the presence of Iraqis and Palestinians in Syrians' everyday lives. At the same time, these interpersonal encounters helped to inform and create Syrians' ideas of what being Iraqi or Palestinian involved and how that then was distinct from being Syrian.

This chapter, however, will focus on how Syrians relate to potential outsiders who are usually located outside Syria and are not 'brought in' as much through popular forums like *Layalina*, but instead through 'politics.' Rather than examining Syrians' (explicit and self-aware) identity-work, I will explore the ways that conspiracy narrations, usually prompted by events in recent history, performed similar sorts of connections and disconnections as identity-work, even when they were explicitly *about* (for Syrians) politics or political analysis. Though concerned with specific events, middle class Syrians' analysis of them often rested on broader conceptualizations of the (hidden) nature of political-economic power and the intentions of those who wield it. Even more important than intentions, though, were the methods through which power was obtained or expanded; Syrian concerns with morality began to come through in these narrations, where morality seems to be more of an adherence to a proper 'aesthetic' (Jean-Klein, in press) than to a given set of permissible and forbidden actions. Finally, what I hope to convey via the re-telling of these narrations is a return to the idea that, despite their seeming attempts to create something solid and foundational (i.e. uncovering the 'truth'), there is nevertheless a sense of fluidity that underpins these conspiracy narrations and what Syrians are effecting through the telling of them. I suggest that this constant motion

presents a challenge to one of the ways in which anthropologists have come to conceptualize knowledge production and may demand a rethinking of our own theoretical underpinnings.

Israel, the Jews and 9/11

One of the most common narrations that was related to me, especially early on in my fieldwork, was that of the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. These narrations would almost invariably involve my informants, from all walks of life, asking my opinion on what had happened that day, usually followed by their version of events, and always came to the same conclusions. My informants related to me that, despite what all the Western television stations⁶³ had shown, it was not Arabs or Muslims who had perpetrated the 9/11 bombings. Instead, some combination of the American government, the Jewish-American community, and possibly the Israeli state itself were the culprits. Western news agencies either did not know what was known to the Syrian news teams; or they were afraid to publish what they knew, because they were heavily influenced by and accountable to the perpetrators themselves. For anyone who was willing to look, they told me, there were major discrepancies in the official statements, indicating that someone (or more than one) is hiding something. Further, the very obviousness of the Arab and Muslim community as the villain made them the least likely to have actually done it. This community would have been able to guess that the blame would have fallen on them and would not have been so foolish as to set themselves up to be punished (a point reiterated when Rafik Hariri was assassinated). However, a clever enemy of the Arab and Muslim peoples would also know this and might have utilized such a prejudice. Effectively, a third party could safely attack the U.S., resting assured that the country would jump to the conclusion that the terrorists were Arabs or Muslims, thus

⁶³ Which are all considered to be owned or heavily influenced by American and/or Jewish interests. Indeed, immediately following one informant's suggestion that the Jews had destroyed the World Trade Center, another friend responded that the reason the Jews were doing so well throughout the world was because they had good public relations and had taken full advantage of their access to the international Media to promote themselves and their cause.

ensuring that these latter communities lose face in the international realm.⁶⁴ In this light, I would argue that such narrations are therefore distinctly *not* concerned with countering a lack of transparency (as West and Sanders [2003] would have it), because official representations that are too transparent are automatically suspect. And the emphasis on the loss of face here is quite similar to the ways Syrians engage in interpersonal relations as well as international ones, a thread I shall return to in Chapter 7.

When relating their take on the events of September 11th, my informants rarely offered much in the way of motives, as if they were too obvious to really need stating. When I pressed them, they would often describe how the Jews, especially Israelis and Zionists, hate the Arabs and would no doubt love to see their foes destroyed or thrown into chaos (not necessarily a difficult task, if we take into account how Syrians describe the Lebanese and, as we will see later, themselves). When accounting for America's involvement, they would explain the "commonly known" fact that the Jewish community has a great deal of political clout in the U.S.⁶⁵ and that America generally has a protective attitude towards Israel. And of course, they said, oil is, as it has been for some time, a driving force for much political action in the Middle East.

In different settings and conversations, though, I learned that some Syrians did not consider the tragedy of September 11th to exist in isolation, but thought it was indicative of and related to a much broader concern with the United States' and Israel's intentions towards the region. Much of the assessment was founded on a neo-imperialistic model, with Syrians foreseeing their land being swallowed up in a Greater Israel, or perhaps a Greater America, or some combination of both. But even in these dire predictions, there were warnings that the Arabs and Muslims of the region would seek to defend themselves. For instance, shortly after Hariri had been killed, a married, upper-middle class informant told me that:

⁶⁴ As an aside, my experience of such interpretations of the events of 9/11 are in no way limited to my Syrian informants. I have heard any number of variations on this theme in the US and the UK and from other (mostly European) friends since 2001.

⁶⁵ A theme that historian T. Fraser (1989) has noted, specifically the political clout of the Jewish lobbying groups within the US throughout the 20th century, including putting pressure on President Johnson to take up French slack in military sales to Israel (1989:85) and the near blocking of President Reagan's sale of military arms to Saudi Arabia (1989:163-70).

America and Israel are working towards making the entire Middle East their turf (*sic*). They started in Iraq, now they're getting a hold in Lebanon, and they're looking at Syria next. And this is happening despite the fact that they should have learned from the Lebanese civil war not to get involved in this area—remember, 150 U.S. Marines were killed in a single explosion in an attempt to land on a Lebanese beach.

Similarly, while sitting in a relaxed, Old City café, a younger, lower-middle class man explained to me that,

The Americans and the Israelis are working towards getting as many countries on their 'side' as they can. Through war, peace, or money, they have Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, much of the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia. However, they are a bit worried about Iran and probably will not try a war there because they know that they will lose—the terrain in Iran is much like Afghanistan and the U.S. military has already proved that they can't fight well in that kind of terrain. Also, Iran has one of the biggest armies in the region and there's also the fact that Iran and Syria are allies, and if there's war in Iran, Syrians will flock there to help.

The inclusion of the possibilities that America and Israel could incur severe losses in the case of outright war was not taken to mean that the two nations would give up on their goals of domination. Instead, they have had to find more subtle and hidden ways of gaining power in the region. The attack on the Twin Towers was one such instance, but there have been others, especially recently. In April of 2005, a mosque in New York City shocked the Muslim world by allowing a woman to lead prayer, not just in front of women, but in front of men as well. Debate raged between Muslims in Syria as to whether or not this was an acceptable practice, with some asserting that under no circumstance was it allowable for a woman to pray in front of a man, much less lead men in prayer (though it would be acceptable for a woman to lead a congregation of solely other women). Others argued, however, that "it is better that a human being (*ibn ou bint adam*) lead a prayer than a beast (*wahash*)," meaning here that it was preferable for a woman who was well-educated in Islam to lead the prayer than an uneducated man—as explained by an older gentleman educated in an Islamic *madraseh* (school). However, while I was visiting a female friend in her air-conditioned, New City apartment, her husband assured me that the whole incident was about something much more sinister:

There are reputable [if unspecified] sources that say that this woman was being sponsored by the American government and Jewish groups within the

U.S. specifically to undermine Islam in its pure form. Along with that, the American government has funded the publishing of a new form of the Qur'ān called the al-Furqaan [which, I was told, is another name for the Qur'an] that they are sending out to schools all over the place, including Kuwait and other Gulf states. It is not a correct version, though, and teaches incorrect things, like neither *jihād* nor the veiling of women being a necessity in Islam.⁶⁶ They are working to destroy the real meaning of Islam by spreading this and so destroy us from the inside.

That the U.S. and Israel are out to conquer, subvert or destroy the rest of the Middle East was a fact of Syrians' everyday lives. That the rest of the world does not know about their intentions was no real surprise, because world leaders—i.e. the perpetrators—keep their actions and intentions well hidden.

(Re)Arranging the Globe

Analyzing Politics...

These narrations provide an example of the ways in which my Syrian informants talked about incidents and political relations across the globe. While Syrians were not direct actors in these stories, they did have a vested interest in and a grasp of such events and their hidden motives. The according of blame and enacting of revenge after the September 11th attacks could, and did, have great repercussions on the Muslim and Arab communities. That is, of course, assuming that there *is* any such thing as a Muslim or Arab community. But I would argue that is precisely what these narrations *do*—they serve as an expression/creation of some kind of connection between all people who might call themselves Arab or Muslim, in contrast to some of the disconnections we saw being done with the narrations in Chapter 2. I shall return to this point below.

But first, I would like to take a step back and examine the perhaps more readily comprehensible idea that these narrations are a form of political analysis. They are a space in which Syrians could engage in global politics via creating and involving themselves in a discourse of its workings (to which they had little access

⁶⁶ What struck me as interesting in this particular commentary was that the speaker was a Sunni Muslim whose wife did not cover, despite being also being a devout Muslim. In other moments, both assured me that physical veiling was not necessary for women—it was instead the action of modesty (rather than vanity) that was important to be maintained, more than the appearance of it. This, however, was not a very common view.

otherwise). Through the course of their narrating, to me and each other, Damascenes examined what had happened as presented from a variety of sources, assessed the context of that representation and the reliability of the sources, and finally drew conclusions based on their assessments. They even looked for what might seem to be unrelated incidents that lent further support to their conclusions, verifying and validating their ideas with external evidence.

This process, I would argue, is not so distant from my own experience of research, analysis and writing as a budding anthropologist. Jon Anderson (1996) agrees that this style of narrative (what he chooses to label as conspiracy theory) is a form of political analysis, but one that “proceed[s] from too little information, from information that is imprecise, where too little is known. ...What is unknown or lacking...is a clear indication of the context of what is known” (Anderson 1996:96-7). However, according to Syrians’ descriptions, it is actually the Western world that is making judgments based on too little information; it is *they* who are not taking the full details and context into account. While an American might call a Syrian a conspiracy theorist for concluding that it was the Americans and the Jews who brought down the Twin Towers, a Syrian would call the American naïve for not being willing to face the corrupt and often conspiratorial nature of politics by blithely accepting the reports blaming Osama bin Laden.

For that is the underlying understanding here: the knowledge that politics and political-economic power can (and frequently do) corrupt. That those in power are willing to use whatever means, regardless of how immoral they may be, to achieve their goals. If the best way to ensure that Arabs and Muslims are internationally disgraced is to kill over 3,000 people in a very momentous way, then the powerful movers and shakers would not hesitate to do so. But they would have to keep it hidden, because even they would not be wholly free from rebuke if they were discovered. Immorality, especially amongst politicians and the world’s elite, is to be expected. However, that these narrations make certain assumptions about the corrupting power of politics is no more or less than what Syrians could (or would) tell you themselves. And though they might laugh at themselves in moments and acknowledge the conspiratorial aspect of their theories (see pg. 19), they do not need

to be told that what they are doing might be a form of political analysis; they already know that.

... and Making Connections

The violation of moral boundaries others could not, or dare not, breach was one of the characteristic images of an important man of power's social role....[Great *beys* (local men of power)] were figures who highlighted the moral demands and bounds that should not be crossed by 'ordinary' men in sexual and familial life. They were the contrast term by which the acceptable could be unambiguously avoided (Gilsenan 1996:190-1).

Once again it is not enough to merely re-present Syrian analyses. In doing so, we are no more the external, objective observer than are our informants, for we are still participating. Instead we must shift to participate in the anthropological knowledge process, rather than that of our informants (if indeed, they are so very different). Thus do I return to my analysis of the performative aspects of these narrations.

On a very explicit level, the above stories are founded on an understanding of global relations. They contain the idea that the United States and Israel, indeed most or all of the world's Jewish population, are close allies. Powerful figures within these countries can and do work together to secure the best future for themselves. It also rests on and (re)creates the notion that the non-Israeli Middle East is set apart from America and Israel; there is both a physical and ideological gap between them. As I hinted above, the text of these narrations creates a sense of unity between the victimized 'Arab' and 'Muslim' population. The description of American soldiers landing in Lebanon and being killed was spoken of in proud tones, as if, in this moment, there were no distinctions between Syria and Lebanon (thus creating the situation where there were none). The concepts of America and Israel, on the other hand, in their conniving and harmful intentions, places them 'outside' the unifying boundary that creates Arabs and Muslims as being insiders. The differences within this regional community that we saw being created in the last chapter are not present in these narrations; instead we see connections between all Arabs and Muslims in contrast to a broad and distinctly 'foreign' coalition.

Importantly, the different sets of insiders and outsiders we have seen created in the different narrations are not contradictory, for connections and disconnections

can be maintained at the same time. Further, I am not suggesting that there is a nesting or hierarchy of social categories that repeat themselves, fractal-like, at different scales (cf. Strathern 1991). Everyone has the potential to be made into an insider or an outsider without hierarchical organization (how can they be if the situating of someone as inside or outside is a momentary effect?). Fractals, though infinitely repeating, require moving further away or closer in to examine the different scales. For Syrians, I would argue, *everyone* is within a single field and within equidistant reach of the effects of narrative dis/connections.

Returning to the narrations of 9/11, we see that, while they position the two factions (Arab/Muslim vs. American/Israeli) as very disparate categories based on alliances and motivation, morality also plays its part in distinguishing them. The kinds of people who would perpetrate something like the September 11th attacks are highly immoral figures. They, whoever they might be, are narrated to exist outside the bounds of common humanity and its tendency to preserve life.⁶⁷ By associating these immoral acts and actors with the leaders of America and Israel, the speakers were actively positioning the leaders beyond the bounds of what is morally acceptable. Not only were ‘they’ out to get a momentarily unified ‘us,’ ‘they’ attempted to achieve their goals via sneaky and immoral means. The insider group, then, was not just a reactive connection that existed in contrast to a common enemy, but was also an active one because the insiders shared and adhered to a certain moral code that was illuminated by those who had broken it. The narrators claimed, using these narrations, the moral high ground. Jean-Klein (in press) insightfully suggests that morality is not so much a framework (as I have thus far engaged with it here), but a process that must be continuously enacted and recreated (much like social categories). Narrations such as those I have presented here can, in this light, become a way of actually doing morality, as the speakers are delineating and condemning ‘immoral’ acts and are thus asserting their own moral status.

⁶⁷ This is partially reflected, I feel, in the fact that many of my informants were uncomfortable discussing martyrs/suicide bombers, who were both inside and outside individuals’ understandings of moral frameworks.

However, while from one angle these narrations contain a clear delineation of who holds the power and who is connected to whom, the situation becomes somewhat more uncertain when examined from other sides. While the general acknowledgment in these narrations was that America and Israel are far more powerful figures than their Arab/Muslim counterparts, the stories also contained a sense of Arab/Muslim strength. The foreign powers, in having to rely on secretive methods of attacking their enemies, were portrayed as lacking the military might to truly destroy the united Arab population. My informants recalled the places and times that this foreign military power had failed in the face of Arab or Muslim might. The foreigners were not as infallible as they might have thought.

This representation and display of oneself as strong is not uncommon in Middle Eastern ethnography. It is often described as being a method of maintaining one's (and one's family's) honor and social image while avoiding unnecessary or unwanted conflict (cf. Dresch 1989, Gilsenan 1976). While Syrians did not say that they actually expected any conflict, the potential for it was there, because these two groups—the insiders and outsiders—were being created as oppositional and not just distinct. But Syrians narrated themselves as being capable of dealing with such a threat. This pride at being powerful included other Arab populations as well, especially the Lebanese and loosely the Iranians. They are made to be not merely united as victims of a common enemy, but as a group that also exists under its own volition. They empowered themselves by declaring that they were not just a passive, reactionary collection of people, but an active and dangerous one.

But these narrations, while describing the Israelis and Americans as weaker than commonly thought, were also constructing them as immoral and clever. They had moved from brute force to the more subtle methods of trying to make their opponents lose face. Gilsenan (1996) suggests that, in Lebanon, using cleverness to undercut an overbearing, superior opponent was an admirable skill, but only effective

⁶⁸ I use this term hesitantly, trying to avoid Reed's (2003:19 n. 5) critique that some anthropologists "set about critiquing anthropological representations that rely on idioms of totality, unit and presence by highlighting what they take to be the ambiguous, continually deferred and transient." What I wish to illustrate here is neither an idiom of totality or transience, but rather how the two can be contained within a single instance. I would critique instead the strict adherence to either absolute.

when used in a face-to-face situation where one could outwit the other and leave them standing with no reply. Here, the victims (i.e. the insiders) did not occupy a superior position (in relation to standing in the global community—though they have set themselves up as equals in terms of military capability). And the Israeli/American deviousness went behind the backs of Syrians, rather than facing them head on and giving them the opportunity to retort. Being clever might be laudable, but only in the right situations.

There are further unexpected (dis)connections within these stories as well. My informants once again pre-empted anthropologists, in that they were well-versed in how to examine the sub-divisions within a seemingly unified group (Ortner 1995). They implicitly called into question the actual existence of a firm alliance between Israel and the United States. The interpretation of the events of September 11th contain an unstated accusation that the Jews (and select U.S. politicians) attacked American soil. The goal may have been to discredit the Muslim world, but the action killed thousands of Americans. In narrating these divides, Syrians were observing and recreating lines of disconnection between two outsiders, disconnections that did not directly involve the speaker or anyone in the speaker's 'inside' (for the course of this narration), which we will encounter again below.

The fluidity with which connections and disconnections were made reflects several things. They point to an uncertainty about the exact nature of politics today, as to who really holds the power. But there is nothing wrong with being confused, the narrations seem to say, because everything of consequence happens out of sight. Performatively speaking, there was never a constant or permanent dividing line between who is inside or out; any such divides were constantly in flux, being made, remade and unmade, sometime in the course of a single narration. Within, as well as across, accounts, the nature of the world and the ways in which Syrians related everything to everything else was subject to change. This process was not ambiguous for Syrians—they had no problems effecting multiple connections or disconnections at the same time for they did not see them as multiple processes. The effects of these narrations are momentary and multi-sited, coming and going as quickly as the words required to speak them.

And Making Connections, Take Two

What I have outlined above shows how such narrations of international practices and motives recreate and reposition figures across the globe. But they also have a further connection-making capacity, one that is much more ‘everyday’ and personal. My understanding of this other aspect stems from the fact that, as I mentioned in the opening description of the September 11th attacks, every time I was involved in a discussion, my Syrian informants would ask me my opinion. Or, even if they did not outright ask, they would probe to see what my reaction would be. Frequently, this questioning would take place the first time I met a particular person. Even at the time, I felt as if they were ‘sounding’ questions, as if people were using them to gauge their opinions of me. The following are brief excerpts taken from my fieldnotes in moments where I was faced with such questioning. I always answered honestly and was not sure if there was a ‘correct’ answer or what it might have been.

In the midst of conversations ranging from the problems of being a working woman in Syria to her dislike of French vampire films, Haya mentioned, almost in an offhand manner, the silliness of the idea that a man living in a cave in Afghanistan could bring down the Twin Towers. She suggested that the Jews, on the other hand, were much more powerful than that. She quickly moved on to another topic, but I noticed her eyes had been on me the whole time, with a slight smile on her face.

Without warning, Alia, a single, retired woman, turned and asked if I thought Arabs really perpetrated the attacks of September 11th and I said yes, I thought it was Osama bin Laden—he had said so, after all. She didn’t respond, but just nodded slowly with her eyes narrowed, giving me the sense that she was disagreeing and had made some judgment of me.

Within an hour of meeting me in her spacious and lavishly-decorated sitting room, Abeer turned and asked me what I thought about September 11th, specifically the idea that it might have been staged by the Americans themselves, with Osama bin Laden only acting as a scapegoat. She seemed rather amenable to the idea, nodding as she mentioned the possibility. I said that I didn’t really know, but hoped not. She merely nodded at me.

All of these women were older than I, well-educated and from middle class backgrounds. With later reflection, I realized that my responses to their probing led them to position me (in relation to them) as a somewhat naïve, younger, American woman. I was external to them and to their knowledge. However, by broaching the

topic at all, they were creating a space for connection between us, where I could move in to occupy a position as a younger woman who could (and possibly wished to) be educated by those with more experience of the world. They established me as an effective pupil, bringing me ‘inside’ to a degree, and indicated that I was (made) trustworthy enough to discuss sensitive political issues with. This ‘political talk’ served as an opportunity for them to assess and position me, and not just in subsequent ‘political’ conversations, but in all aspects of life. Indeed, each woman spent much time explicitly instructing me in all manners of things, from how to balance career and home life, to how to negotiate the Syrian medical system, to what to wear during Ramadan. Politics, then, could even serve to inform the state of everyday relations—engaging the political opened up room for engaging non-political life. And with time, it even allowed me to begin to assert myself in a role that was less prominently that of the student in need of teaching. My age kept me in a somewhat more minor status, but my foreign-ness and my growing ability with politics and *how* to discuss it contributed to a slow change in how people (specifically these women) related to me. For instance, I was finally able to challenge them on some of their hypothesizing, such as the instance I presented in Chapter 1 (pg 19).

The Death of Yasser Arafat

There was perhaps only one major event during my stay in Syria that did not elicit a massive wave of debate: the death of Yasser Arafat. There was no need to discuss it, because it was obvious to everyone that the Israeli leaders had had him poisoned. This would seem to provide further support for the idea that it is only the unobvious and the hidden which are really worth discussing in depth—there is no use in theorizing over what is plain to see.⁶⁹ Instead the talk surrounding Arafat focused on two other broad, but related issues. The first was who his successor would be—one friend informed me that the Israelis would likely release one of their Palestinian political prisoners so that he could run for the presidency. After years of having him

⁶⁹ Compare this to the description of September 11th, where what was too openly visible was the official representation and therefore suspect. Here, what is obvious to everyone is invisible in the official version, again making the official representation unbelievable.

in prison, they had him well trained and he would therefore make an excellent puppet leader. In such conversations, my informants were again positioning Palestinians as insiders, people with a shared background and enemies, somewhat of a seeming contrast to the way Syrians narrated Palestinians when discussing their presence in Syria.

However, not all of the accusations of hidden activities were directed against the Israelis. After the initial outcries of sorrow and claims of brotherhood with the Palestinians in their loss, there was a great deal of talk about the scandals surrounding Arafat, including those he and other high-level Palestinians were involved in and those that sprung up after his death. The central concern here was money, how it was used, and the struggle for it afterwards. The narrations, here compiled from the narrations of two informants,⁷⁰ posited that the Palestinian leaders were more interested in money than their supposed cause of an autonomous Palestine. Each of the leaders was said to have vast sums of money in foreign accounts, money that they could have used to help their people, but instead kept for themselves. They would meet in Sharm al-Sheikh in fancy hotels with air conditioning and nice food, talking about the state of affairs while their people were starving to death. Arafat was perhaps one of the worst, as (so middle class Syrians said) he was the ninth richest man in the world, having taken much of the money donated to the Palestinian cause and put it into his personal bank accounts. After his death, an Israeli group of officials began confronting other leading Palestinians about Arafat's accounts, but the Palestinians refused to respond.

And this greed extended beyond the official leaders. After he died, I was told, Arafat's wife began publicly screaming at the Palestinian dignitaries in France. She accused them of trying to take his money and insisted that he was not dead yet. However, as righteous as she sounded, it was believed to be a façade, because she actually wanted the money for herself. She was described as a "vulgar" (*ghalīzeh*) woman who managed to get all the money in the end, though there was hope that other, newer Palestinian leaders would try to take it from her and use it for the cause as it was intended. And a further critique of her arose when we saw Arafat's wife and ten year-old daughter on television and my married female friend watching it with

⁷⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly, the first description was supplied by a male informant and the second by a female one.

me tutted and said, “Their daughter is very pretty, but that’s strange because Arafat was so ugly and his wife is not only *ghalīzeh*, but she’s not at all attractive (*halweh*) either.”

The commentary on secretive Israeli involvement in Arafat’s death and the setting up of a more amenable regime in Palestine is hardly surprising, given other narratives that externalize Israel. But here again we see the complexities of the positioning of other ‘groups’ that are both like the narrators and not—specifically, the Palestinians. The death itself might have been attributed to meddling foreign powers, but what it illuminated were the scandals that these powerful Palestinian leaders were involved in—in effect, they were corrupt. And we encounter here a situation where there was a complication (for the anthropologist) in trying to determine exactly *who* was being other-ed. Just as ‘America’ did not seem to always mean *all* Americans, but sometimes instead referred to a subset of powerful ones (who would be willing to organize an attack on their own country), so here ‘Palestinians’ seemed to refer to elite members of the Palestinian movement. Palestinians were narrated to not always be a unified category. But by the same token, in creating distance from the leaders of a place—as Syrians are doing with their morality-work—there is the possibility for a lesser, but parallel distancing from the population of that place as well. The general ‘Palestinians’ after all, allowed their leaders to hoard and squander the money intended to help the entire population and did nothing to stop it.

The narrations create a highly dynamic and constantly shifting set of alliances, of incorporation and separation. In the course of two tellings we can see a differentiation not only between the taken-for-granted categories of insiders and outsiders (Muslims and Jews) but also between Syrians and Palestinians, a disconnection that is made within the same narration as the Arab-solidarity connection. Or perhaps it can be read as a case of insiders being made to include those Arabs without vast amounts of wealth but with a strong sense of morality versus outsiders as the rich and powerful who were willing to sell out their beliefs to further their personal gain. Or perhaps it is both at once. The fact that this shifting seems confusing and muddled emphasizes the point that ethnographic writing and

our tendency to break things into discrete compartments can be more hindering than it revealing.

There are three other points worth noting here. One is that in combining the various positionings of the above analysis, there emerges a moment where the Palestinians were set up as being very much insiders with Syrians (and, by extension, other Muslim Arabs), and that the corrupt Palestinian officials at the top originate *from* that otherwise moral population. This configuration highlights a concept of power's tendency to corrupt and that there is, in a sense, an *expectation* of this corruption.⁷¹ But the stories of Arafat's scandals reveal that it is not only distant and very foreign persons who are susceptible. Even people 'like us' (and maybe even us, ourselves?) who currently hold the moral high ground were liable, in fact likely, to be corrupted if placed in the right circumstances of power and wealth. Morality then becomes a more complex concept, with it being uncertain if people are defined by their strength of morals, or if the morals that people abide by are determined by who and where they are in society. And it certainly returns us to the idea that if morality is not constantly being enacted (as it is obviously was not by Arafat and his companions), then the actors will slip from a positively moral status.

The second thing that I wish to note here is the importance of appearance. Appearance, what was made visible and what was kept out of sight, has been present in various forms throughout the examples I have given thus far. It will continue to be so throughout and I will attempt to unpack it more thoroughly in other places. However, I wish here to merely draw attention to the fact that my (female) informant, in the context of 'talking politics,' thought it important to include an assessment of the physical appearance of Arafat, his wife and his daughter. It was not the first or last time I heard such a commentary. Indeed, one friend told me that Hilary Clinton would never become president because she was not attractive enough and she had bad taste in suits. She went on to say that Bill Clinton had been a great president, in no small part because he was so handsome. Perhaps an emphasis on the physical appearance stems from the importance in this region that a leader has a physical *presence* (Gilsenan 1996:3-4; Layne 1994:146).

⁷¹ Similarly, Ibn Khaldoun (2005:133-138) argues that dynasties become "senile" after three generations, and are prone to lying, weakness and cowardice

Or perhaps this is also a more gendered way of engaging in politics, for it was always my female informants making such comments. It parallels a way in which women engaged with each other in everyday life. Alternating flowering praise and scathing critique was one of the primary forms of social interaction among women. While attending a wedding, one of the groom's nieces, of an age with me, told me that I was very pretty, but her cousin was far prettier than me. She also disapproved of my outfit of trousers and a nice top. She and all of the close relatives of the marrying couple were decked out in ballroom gowns, with their hair professionally done and faces made up exquisitely. My hair too had been professionally styled, but everyone was quite willing to tell me that it was not a very nice style on me. Weight also seemed to be an all-important indicator of a woman's quality, as it was inevitably commented on, with the loss of weight (*nahfāneh*) being greeted with delighted cries (from both the speaker and the one who has lost the weight), and the gaining of weight (*samnāneh*) was addressed in a disapproving tone, but was usually (mockingly) laughed off. Salamandra (2004) neatly describes the antagonism that is frequent in female socialization, challenging the traditional anthropological representations of a loving and harmonic harem of women. As she notes, "relatively young, unmarried women from elsewhere find relationships with Syrian women difficult to form and also nearly impossible to maintain" (2004:64), a sentiment I was well-familiar with. I found that younger women and older, married women were much easier to get on with than women of my own age, with whom there was a constant sense of challenge and competition. And appearance was an all-important tool in the course of these encounters. It was not that these Syrian women were being unfriendly, but more that the negative aspects of their relationships (as important to the relationship as the positive part) were sometimes a bit difficult for a woman raised outside of Syria to understand and engage in (see Chapter 7 for elaboration on the duplexity of affection and challenging in everyday relationships). With this in mind, I might suggest that awareness and critique of appearance was indeed a way for women (and men as well—they were not totally isolated from these challenging interactions) to engage in politics.

There is one final point I would like to make, in reference to a single line in the narration of corruption: "After his death, an Israeli group of officials began

confronting these leading Palestinians about Arafat's accounts, but the Palestinians refused to respond." In this depiction, the Israelis were the only ones trying to hold the corrupt Palestinian leaders accountable for their actions. Though the speaker was trying to emphasize the immorality of the Palestinians' actions, by choosing to describe it in this way, he was also making (if possibly without meaning to) a quiet moral judgment about the Israelis in this instance. If hoarding and stealing funds is made out to be morally bad here, then the attempt to make the conspirators accountable becomes morally good. This moment was one of the only times I heard the Israelis presented in a positive light; through the course of this description, my informant was creating a *positive* connection with the Israelis via a set of shared morals that would discourage hoarding. Granted, the connection was not a particularly strong one and was much negated by the other narrations, but it is small moments like this that emphasize the very fluidity of relations. It points to the idea that multiple connections between and lines around 'dots' (i.e. people) can exist simultaneously. Some might argue that these are competing narratives that create competing connections, but I would argue that both connections and disconnections exist as *potentials* and can both be enacted by anyone at the same time or in turns. (Love-hate relationships are hardly an uncommon concept.) This duplexity also indicates that relations must constantly be maintained or risk becoming non-connections (i.e. being reduced to merely potentials, neither connections nor disconnections). In this vague area of potentiality, there is no relating, no sense of positioning between two objects, merely the possibility of lines along which dis/connections can be engaged. There are no primordial connections between people(s), but only potentials that are either enacted or not, and these can and do exist in a field of multiplicity.

The Death of Rafik Hariri

One of the sensible follow-ups to looking at Arafat's death is to look at the next major death incident that occurred while I was in Syria: the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. I was sitting in a friend's shop in a bustling *sūq* the day the bombing in Beirut occurred. Someone phoned him and told him to turn on the satellite to the news, where we watched the aftermath. Nearby street vendors and a

steady stream of clients poured into the shop throughout the day, checking for updates and quietly sharing thoughts on what had happened. Unlike the Arafat case, everyone was talking about and debating who had killed Hariri. Arafat's death had been in a hospital and relatively quiet. In contrast, the Hariri assassination was unexpected, public, and very clearly politically motivated, but as far as Syrians were concerned, there was no immediately obvious guilty party, no *one* group that would want him dead. They began to line up suspects and analyze each one's motives, finding arguments and counter-arguments for all of them. Throughout the course of that first day, the Israeli and Syrian governments were the first to be considered as potential assassins. This then shifted to suspecting the Israelis and the Americans working together, and ended with Syria being ruled out as a suspect and factions within Lebanon (possibly aided by Israel) joining the list of potential conspirators. The inclusion of Lebanese people was based on an idea that there were camps in both Lebanon and Israel for whom war was a justification for keeping up large armies and weapon stockpiles. In an ironic turn, various customers told me, shaking their heads ruefully, that such groups would actually be willing to work together in order to ensure a status quo of official and popular tensions and an on-the-verge-of-war status.

By the time I left the field in summer 2005, there was no real resolution in Syrian minds as to who had *actually* killed Hariri. The only conclusion that Syrians would draw (and even this with caveats and hesitations) was that, logically, the Syrian government was not involved, if for no other reason than they would be the first ones blamed in such a situation and ultimately stood only to lose by the death (in terms of global repercussions), a logic that we also saw applied in the Twin Towers case.

Here again, the narrations created a sense of inside and outside. There was the association of certain Lebanese groups—that elsewhere had been considered 'inside' as either Muslim or Arab—with the ultimate enemy of Israel. Syrians' theorizing worked to distance Syria from Lebanon and call attention to the uncertain moral stance of Lebanese factions that would abandon their principles to achieve their goals. It created (by identifying) hidden connections between Lebanon and Israel, meaning that perhaps the former was not to be so readily trusted. Of course,

this repositioning of Lebanon as something distant from Syria was also a reaffirmation of the rocky relations between the two countries (or some parties within Lebanon) in the aftermath of the Syrian involvement in the Lebanese civil war. But I would argue that these narrative accusations were not *only* the restating of official and historical tensions. The tension and the divisions were being actively created as Syrians narrated the countries into certain positions, but did so within and around narrations that also (re)created a pan-Arab unity in the mourning of the loss of one of ‘Our’ great leaders (even if he did advocate anti-Syrian policies).

Arab Pride

In and amongst all of this hypothesizing as to the perpetrators’ identity were stories about Hariri and his life, much like in Arafat’s case. However, these stories were (at least initially) very positive, even coming from Syrians, whom he was supposedly working against.⁷² Awestruck, middle class Damascenes told a tale of his rags-to-riches history, and though people criticized him for being so rich (one informant claimed he might have been the fourth richest man in the world), they explained that he gave a lot to his country, and put himself and his own comforts last. He did not impoverish himself, but he did things for Lebanon, including rebuilding parts of Beirut and funding something like 30-40,000 students to go study abroad. At first the Lebanese grumbled that he had sent a small army out of the country, but many of my university-educated Syrian informants considered it a wise idea, as it ensured that there would be an army of well-educated Lebanese who would be able to return to their country and help secure its future, rather than creating an ultimately useless generation of gun-toting *jedbān* (‘idiots’—indicating the required military service that young Syrian men have to attend). Though it may have also been a comment on the quality of Syrian higher education being below European or even Lebanese standards.

On a more personal level, Syrians, especially but not only women, told stories about the romance of Hariri’s life, a fairy-tale love that spanned the ages of time. They told me how he and his current wife were in love many years ago when he was

⁷² Various commentators emphasized the *good*, working relationship between Hariri and the Syrian government, even though they were striving for different things.

still poor, but because she had belonged to a wealthy family, they had not been allowed to marry. They had both married someone else, but after he got his fortune, they each divorced their respective spouses so that they could finally be together. Generally newspapers were full of praise for Hariri's works, and the streets were full of public sympathy for his loss. He was lauded with praise, while emotions ran high, his death creating a pan-Arab sense of outrage and unity. He was every Arab's hero, giving them a common figure whose death united them and washed away any divisions.

Lebanese Scandal

At the same time, other, darker stories began circulating, closer to those that appeared after Arafat's death. A different image of Hariri began to emerge. While sitting with him in his second home in the mountains, one upper-middle class Christian informant, with scorn apparent in his voice, told me that the guy (*zelemeh*) was a multi-billionaire who had had investments in all sorts of suspect ventures. One of his projects had apparently involved the filling in of some of the sea along the coast and making himself a wide stretch of new beach-front property, which he could sell at his whatever prices he wished. This drove down the prices of what had formerly been beachfront property. My informant considered it awful that someone would do that, ruining not just the land value of the previous beachfront, but also all of the sentimental value that many of these places had for people who had spent their vacations there. And all to make some money.

Other rumors began to circulate about his marriages, whispers that he had not just divorced his first wife, but had effectively *sold* her to a Saudi Arabian man for millions of dollars. And, echoing the themes of appearance surrounding Arafat and his wife, one Sunni friend, whose husband had just bought them a new apartment, told me with a shake of her head that Hariri's second wife had spent quite a bit of time in Paris at his expense and had quite a bit of plastic surgery done. Given the amount of lipstick she had been wearing to the funeral, my informant suspected that the most recent was lip surgery. It was either in the process of healing or had gone horribly wrong and hence the lipstick. This display of vanity, rather than a more subdued grief, is apparently a faux-pas at Muslim funerals, and my friend was

disgusted. But this disapproval then spread back somewhat onto Hariri himself, for being so foolish at having chosen and loved such a shallow, selfish, superficial wife.

Such narrated personal attacks are similar to the methods that Gilsenan (1996:52) describes his Lebanese informants using to discredit and shame their opponents, especially narrations of a morally upright man being able to shame his opponent, who is then refigured as the less capable and moral man. However, whether it is just Hariri who was the object of Syrians' attack or whether this negativity extended to the Lebanese population more generally was unclear. Either way, this created a substantially different positioning than the narrations of praise, setting Hariri (and at least other rich politicians like him) as partially immoral and corrupt, thus backlighting what a proper man should do (not destroy that which belongs to everyone for personal gain) and also what a proper wife should *not* be (vain, especially in moments of sorrow). The inclusion of these famous figures in the roles of the morally inconsistent helps to form a sense of what proper morals that all *good* Arabs should adhere to—by being described as not doing so, these figures (and perhaps the people they represent) were being sharply disconnected from Syrians. And again, we see the theme that power can and does corrupt anyone.

*Son of the City*⁷³

One of the most direct critiques of Hariri came not in stories of praise or rumors of shame in his financial and private lives, but in the form of humor. Navaro-Yashin (2002:23, 25) notes how humor can play a pivotal role in creating space for people to

⁷³ 'Son of the City' (*ibn al-medineh*) is, in Damascus, a term that implies classiness, good breeding, and a certain amount of wealth. It is a term of respect, and one I usually heard from middle class informants who were describing their social superiors. It pointedly did not refer to only financial superiors, because the *nouveaux riches* who were originally from the countryside were not included in this category. However, it was not limited to people from Damascus, as it could also be applied to those from other cities, especially Beirut. This is an interesting contrast to the term *ibn al-balad* (son of the country) in Egypt, which refers to a certain type of people considered to be 'real' Egyptians who have certain characteristics and traits, but only come from Cairo (and usually specific neighborhoods within Cairo). *Ibn al-balad*, unlike *ibn al-medineh*, generally refers to a lower socio-economic class of person and can be either a positive (in a 'salt of the earth' way) or a negative term (indicating someone who is backwards and unsophisticated) (El-Messiri 1978). Both are an ideal(ized) form of identity, though, and can be played on to emphasize the effects of wealth and corruption (Armbrust 1996). Both also have something to say about modernity and relations with the West, where an *ibn al-balad* is someone who maintains his traditions over Western ones, while an *ibn al-medineh* would likely be rooted in traditional urban, but well-versed in Western, culture.

articulate their concerns, and is an “orally produced popular fiction [that is]...one of the most effective arenas for the production and consumption of discourse on local culture.” However, I feel it is no great leap to substitute ‘personal and national politics’ in place of her ‘local culture.’ Looking at political humor as an ethnographic site becomes especially appropriate in the context of this thesis, because it is an unofficial and often indirect language of politics. Humor, like conspiracy theories, assumes that invisible connections will be made, i.e. that both speaker and listener will pick up on and understand the (same) unsaid context. Via humor, political critique can be disguised as something that, to an observer, is not particularly serious. Humor also allows for the changing of names and places that relies on a shared knowledge of process and context that will allow both speaker and listener to know who the joke is ‘really’ about. However, even though it is hidden, such humor can still be hazardous if the wrong people (i.e. those in power or who are the butt of the jokes) are made aware of its existence.⁷⁴ Mobile phones, especially SMS messages, are an increasingly popular forum for sharing and spreading humor in Syria. Given the widespread presence of mobile phones, jokes could travel across vast networks of people in very little time. But this is particularly dangerous, as SMS messages can be traced and decoded if the powers-that-be have any influence in the mobile phone companies. Iran recently experienced such an instance, when the president accidentally (maybe) received an SMS joke about himself. The incident was followed by a judiciary investigation into SMS content and several arrests of those caught passing on uncomplimentary or political humor messages (Tait 2006).

Returning to Rafik Hariri, after the Mehlis report on UN’s investigation into the assassination came out (strongly implicating several members in the upper echelons of the Syrian government), I sent an email to some friends in Syria to see what the general opinion of the report was there. One replied by sending me the following joke, written out in the colloquial Syrian dialect (nb. ‘son of the city’ (*ibn al-medineh*) is a term implying class, refinement and wealth):

⁷⁴ As Wedeen (1999:45), ‘mundane transgressions’ such as humor, rumor and gossip are ways of dealing with sensitive issues that cannot be publicly discussed because of formal and informal censorship.

Once upon a time, a 'son of the city,' Fouad, went to the countryside and made an agreement with a farmer to buy a donkey for 100 dollars and said he would come to collect the donkey the following day.

At the meeting the next day, the farmer said, "Forgive me, sir, but I have bad news. The donkey died."

Fouad replied, "No problem, give me my money back then."

The farmer said, "But I spent the money."

Fouad: "Still no problem. Just give me the dead donkey."

The farmer asked him, "But what do you want to do with a dead donkey?"

Fouad: "I want to raffle him off."

The farmer: "Is it possible to raffle off a dead donkey?!"

Fouad: "Yeah, why not? I won't tell anyone that it's dead. Wait and see."

After a month passed, the farmer met Fouad and asked him, "What happened with the dead donkey?"

Fouad: "I raffled it. I sold five hundred tickets that cost two dollars apiece, so in the end, I made \$998."

The Farmer: "And no one figured it out [that the donkey was dead]?!"

Fouad: "No one figured it out except the person who won the raffle, so I refunded his two dollars."

And the days passed, and Fouad grew into a man and, in time, became the prime minister of Lebanon...

So here, then, in the face of international pressure and the results of a report that indicated that Syrian officials were most likely involved in the assassination of Hariri, a joke began to make the rounds that portrayed the former Prime Minister as a liar and a cheat. He was and had always been, according to the joke, an immoral figure. A pseudonym was used, but the details, especially when taking into account that the joke itself was a response to my request for information on the Hariri report, would make it clear to any Syrian that it was referring to Hariri. He went from being poor to being one of the richest men in Lebanon, but the joke seems to say that this ascent was not without its victims. But there is also an undertone of another critique, one towards the people of Lebanon themselves, as suckers who trusted him with their money and their country. Fouad may have been a thief, but the people themselves were the ones who were foolish enough to give him money for a dead donkey. Indeed, in such a light, Fouad/Hariri is cast as a clever city boy, playing on the ignorance of the rural folk. However, as we have seen, cleverness is only a positive trait when *properly* enacted, not against country bumpkins who are substantially inferior (that this joke was being circulated amongst urban Syrians who *do* consider themselves socially superior to people from the country is relevant here). This humor, then, turns the Hariri worship on its head, instead making him the butt of a

barely veiled criticism. And the Lebanese themselves came under fire, for being such fools to have let him take advantage of them. The rich Arab figure was distanced from Syrians by his act of immorality and inappropriate cleverness, the Lebanese people themselves were also being positioned as different from and more foolish and naïve than the (Syrian) speakers.

Inside or Outside?

Such Syrian criticism of a Lebanese figure and Lebanese people creates a disconnection between the two general populations (rather than just between one's general population and the other's elites), with the Syrians setting themselves up as 'wiser' in more-than-slightly condescending manner.⁷⁵ This moment steps away from a unified-Arab sentiment and instead shifts back to one that is based on state borders (as we saw in Chapter 2), despite (or in spite of?) how artificial people may claim the delineation of Bilad al-Sham is and was. Syrians were presenting/making themselves as something distinctly separate from the Lebanese. Jokes were not the only moments that challenged the solidarity of the Arab world, for there was a similar shifting of perspective in the way Syrians talked about their Lebanese 'cousins.' Indeed, the family metaphor is appropriate, for one urban informant, when I asked her about the difference between the situations in Syria and in Lebanon, hesitated and then replied,

Countries are like families, and not all parents raise their children in the same way. Governments are like the parents and the people like the children, and they vary depending on how much the 'parents' are concerned with taking care of the people or taking care of themselves.

That my question prompted her to answer in terms of family indicates that she saw some connection between the two countries' statuses and family. However, the two were made out to have different sets of parents. Interestingly, though she was not comfortable in answering further questions on this topic, I had the distinct impression that when she spoke of parents prioritizing themselves above their children, she meant Syria and not Lebanon. In either case, her description of the countries situated

⁷⁵ Though this joke and the superior tone within it seem to disregard the reality of the Syrian situation in regards to their own leaders' finances, it is something that they are always aware of (see section on Syrian Criminals, Chapter 4). Indeed, it is, perhaps, their own awareness of the fact that they are being swindled that they feel allows them to be critical of their blind neighbors.

them as being both similar and dissimilar—the Lebanese (in this moment) were both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ Syrians’ circles of closeness and relation, with all the complexities and complications found in familial relationships.

The feel to these sorts of conversations was very much one of older siblings or cousins talking about a younger, more childish relative, one they loved and were responsible for, but were not always proud of. Almost as if Lebanon, between the war and its “superficial” population, was somewhat of a black sheep of the Arab family. Again, this points to a (re)creation of connections, via narrating Syrians and Lebanese to be members of the same family, but also disconnections, where the two populations were made into distinct groups with one being far superior (in their own minds) to the other. Though even this arrangement was not always certain, for there were moments when Syrians also positioned the Lebanese in ways that made them superior to Syrians—saying, for instance, that the Lebanese people loved and cared about their capital city (and Syrians do not), and suggesting that the Lebanese government takes better care of its ‘children.’ This variation illustrates the complexity of the relations between the people of the two countries and that the relationship between them is not concrete in people’s minds. It is a constantly shifting and highly variable dis/connection, always being rediscovered, reconsidered, and recreated through the flows of everyday knowledge and discussion.

Shifting Connections

Through the course of this chapter, I have touched on issues concerning morality, cleverness, and assumptions about corruption and the conspiratorial processes of global politics. I have also attempted to present and elaborate on a variety of ways and types of dis/connections that my Syrian informants made via their narrations of various other people. Often the connections or disconnections were made between the other party and the (Syrian) speakers, but sometimes they were narrated between two parties that were not Syrians (e.g. Americans and Israelis being portrayed as a single group, or Israeli and Lebanese factions acting as one to kill Hariri). Most importantly, I have tried to emphasize the shifting and impermanent nature of these connections and disconnections and that no one is beyond the reach of connectability. In other words, people as far from the everyday encounters of Syrian lives as George

Bush, Tony Blair, or Ariel Sharon are just as capable of being included in Syrian narrations (and thus being connected to or disconnected from) as Bashar al-Asad or one's neighbor.

Another way to think about the connections and disconnections produced by Syrian narrations might be as a process of relating. In connecting to or disconnecting from other people, narrators are positioning those other people in relation to themselves (or each other); they are implicitly saying how these other people relate to them and are therefore *creating* that specific state of relations, even if only for a moment. The regularly repeated performance of specific forms of relations is what gives them a permanent feel. It is not necessary for the other party to reciprocate this relating, in a sense making these connections 'partial' (to borrow a term from Strathern 1991). However, as much as they engaged in observing and analyzing, Syrians always expected that they too were under observation and analysis—expected that other people were always situating *them* in relation to other people. The narrator was also always potentially a subject in someone else's narrations (a thought I shall return to more fully in Chapter 7).

What might the broader implications of connections and disconnections as a form of relating might be? In positioning other people using narrations of identity and political conspiracies, Syrians have a way of knowing the patterns of social relations, *even as they are creating them*. Therefore what I would argue is that what these narrations do is construct knowledge. This is hardly a new idea. According to Hegel's phenomenology (1977:52-53, emphasis in original; cf. Lindholm 1997:753),

Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time *relates* to it, or, as it is said, this something exists *for* consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this *relating*, or of the *being* of something for a consciousness, is *knowing*.

Hegel is speaking in terms of consciousness, but a simple change of term from "consciousness" to "a person" is not an unreasonable interpretation. He argues that "knowing" is an aspect of the process of relating. He explains further that one can never know a "being-in-itself," but only how it exists for oneself, i.e. how it relates to oneself. In terms of the doing of social categories, I read this as saying that we can never know or define social categories except as they relate to us. Whether or not the

social categories exist as beings-in-themselves is irrelevant, because we (as Syrian narrators or anthropologists⁷⁶) can never know them as such, because the moment we make something an object of our analysis, we begin to relate to it and can only know it according to those relations (cf. Bourdieu 1977 and Mitchell's reading of him, 1988:51-52). The object is thus only created when it is made into an object by someone attempting to know it. For all intents and purposes, social categories do not exist until we narrate them, and they do not exist after we have turned our attention elsewhere.

If, then, what I have been describing is ultimately a process of knowledge creation, it is worth comparing it to other models of knowledge production currently in use in anthropology. One of the most common metaphors associated with knowledge is that of the fractal, made popular by Marilyn Strathern (1991). There seem to be two slightly different, but related readings of the fractal. Wagner (1991:162) provides one; he "define[s] the concept of a fractal person in contrast to singularity and plurality...[a] person who is neither singular nor plural." A fractal, for him, is a solution that is neither zero nor 1, neither nor anything discrete in between. He cites the Siane (from the Melanesian area) use of the word 'father', which "is not necessarily identified with a so-called primary kin term here, and is neither singular nor plural. The term has a fractal implication, equally applicable to both situations" (1991:162-163). In other words, it can apply to both situations, but is neither. However, it is not necessary to invoke a fractal image here. Indeed, a Syrian informant once told me his hypothesis of people and God. He drew a square with sides of 1, and then asked me what the hypotenuse's length was. I replied the square root of 2. He nodded and said that within the discrete space of a box with area 1, there was a diagonal that was infinite. He was referring to the fact that the square root of 2 is a complex number, extending infinitely beyond the decimal point with a sequence that never repeats itself (contrast this to the fractal that does repeat its

⁷⁶ Jean-Klein and Riles (2005) note how human rights organizations have co-opted the spaces and practices of anthropologists studying human rights. The case of Syrian observation strangely parallels that—as I have noted in several places, I realized in Syria that all of my informants were far more experienced participant observers than myself, and were also well ahead of me in terms of analysis. Jean-Klein and Riles encourage authors to see "what anthropological encounters with human rights contribute to the development of our discipline" (2005:174). In a similar turn, I hope to allow Syrian practices and understandings of knowledge, relations, and politics inform and develop my anthropology.

pattern). And beyond complicating his argument by the introduction of such a term as fractality, I do not think Wagner's understanding of fractal fits in the case of Syrian relating and knowledge formation. Here we have encountered narractions which are both (and not 'neither') actions and narrations. We have seen that doing relations involves both connections and disconnections. They are only 'neither' one thing nor the other when they are not currently being activated, and then exist only as potential connections. But none of this seems to require a complicated image like a fractal.

Another interpretation of the fractal metaphor is as an image that repeats itself at different scales, where one can zoom in or out and the image will never become less (or more) detailed. Maurer (2002:660) takes up this image and argues that "knowledge is produced through shifts in scale, levels of abstraction from a 'reality.'" However, there are a number of reasons I feel that such a metaphor falls apart in dealing with Syrian narractions (and possibly is revealed to do so more generally). My first concern is about the rigidity of such a model (cf. Harvey 1996:46). Fractals may be infinite, but they are immobile; as a mathematical image, they are based on an equation that will be drawn out and iterated in set and predictable ways. Social knowledge is much more fluid than that, with 'solutions' (i.e. connections or disconnections) appearing and disappearing in rapid order and in no definitive pattern. There are some dis/connections that are more likely than others—the ones that are repeated regularly enough to gain the appearance of permanence—but these can be contradicted, changed, or made to disappear.

Secondly, the concept of scale is equally problematic, for if, as I have suggested, all people are within equal reach of a narrator's relating ability, then deciding which relations belong to which scales becomes somewhat arbitrary. This is especially the case if anthropologists and social scientists are the ones determining where and what the scales are. One could argue that the scale could be determined by which subjects are involved in particular narractions, but such an approach would be quickly become bogged down with the need to be constantly redefining the scales. In Syria, people and relations all seemed to be on a much more level field.

Thirdly, if knowledge is produced through shifts in scale, it begs the question of who is shifting: the informants or the anthropologist or both? If it is the

anthropologist, whose scales is she shifting through, her own or her informants? How does she know (if all knowledge is relational anyhow)? And as far as informants shifting, I would argue that this is not the case for Syrians. Following on Hegel and my informants' narrations, it is not the narrators who are moving; what is being moved are the social relations around that person. It is the speakers who are at the center of this process, not the field. Syrians themselves have the ability and agency to position their world around them, rather than being situated within it. The same, I would argue, equally applies to anthropologists.

My final contention with this model is Maurer's reading of it, where he suggests that knowledge is generated through the "levels of abstraction from a 'reality.'" My reading of this is that it too rests on a Hegelian view where there might be some 'truth,' but we can only know our (relational) version of it. As anthropologists, then, it would seem that in making someone else's knowledge our object of study, we are now at least two degrees removed from the initial truth. I disagree. I do not think that we can 'stack up' levels of knowledge in this fashion. If, practically speaking, our objects of study do not exist until we turn to examine them, and if the same holds true for our informants, then everything begins and ends at a base level of non-existence. This is especially true given the momentary nature of narrations; the knowledge that is my object is not currently being maintained as far as I can be aware (i.e. my informants are not at this moment relating their narrations to me). Therefore, there is no longer a 'level' beneath the one I am engaging. In addition to this, if we consider the implications of the term 'narration,' we see that the passing on (and simultaneous creation of) knowledge is as much an action as it is an abstraction (narration) and so thus becomes a 'being-in-itself' ('reality') even as it becomes abstract. By thinking in terms of abstraction and reality, a divide is put in place that does not account for the duplexitous nature of my Syrian informants' narrations.

Thus the fractal model of shifting scales falls apart in the case of Syrian narrations and their creation of social relations and knowledge. What I need is another metaphor that will allow for the problems noted above. One image that seems quite useful is that of a field, an open and level space that is without scales or levels and has no lines pre-drawn into it. It needs to account for the individual motion

of informants and anthropologists and their abilities to observe, analyze, and relate other people. It must be able to handle the idea that multiple people are always doing these relations at the same time, and that a person can be as much an object of someone else's knowledge as they are an actor narracting their own positionings. And it must be able to reflect the temporariness of this process. What I suggest is a model loosely premised on the children's game 'Connect the Dots,' though somewhat modified. In my version, objects of narractions are the dots and the connections and disconnections are the lines drawn that connect (or separate!) the dots. Drawing the lines symbolizes the process of relating through narractions, and thus doing knowledge. Dots can be people (as in Syrians' narractions) or they can be other people's narracted lines (as in the anthropologists analyzing what Syrians' narractions are doing). Importantly, there are no numbers assigned to the dots to pre-determine which should be connected or disconnected. Everyone has a pencil and the lines are self-erasing, accounting for the constant narracting by multiple actors and the temporary quality of the whole process. It is, of course, not a flawless model, but I will use the rest of this thesis to see how useful a metaphor it might be.

II.

ENGAGING 'SYRIA'

4. Challenging the “Regime”

I was sitting at a friend’s house in one of the lower middle class areas of the Old City having an Arabic-English lesson and, as we so often did, we were using ‘talking politics’ as a basis for practice. During the English half of the lesson, she began to discuss the government in Syria and used the word “regime” to describe it. I was curious about this choice of term and she said that it was the best translation for the word that she would have used in Arabic: *nizām*. I asked her if, in Arabic, the word had a negative connotation, as it does somewhat in English, when referring to ruling forces. She told me that it could, but usually did not; it was more neutral than that—it also translates as ‘system.’ So it is with that conversation in mind, that I use the word ‘regime’ here. I take it to refer to the ruling group of Syria, but without the common negative slant that it often has in English.

The first section of this chapter is effectively a follow-on of the conspiracy narrations of the previous chapter, in that it explicitly navigates the hidden and immoral politicking of major global figures in relation to Syria. However, what makes it slightly different is that it not only speaks to Syria’s relations to external powers (which serves to recreate a ‘Syria’), but also to Syrians’ relations to each other (thus challenging the unity of a ‘Syria’). From there, I will move on to examine other experiences with, narrations of, and ways of narrating the regime, looking at how they are similar to forms of ‘doing’ politics and identity-work that are also doing relations and connections. I will take these connections and disconnections a step further though, and see how they also challenge the Syrian regime. Some of the analyses presented below may have the feel of “resistance” studies. However, when taken in conjunction with Chapters 5 and 6, I hope it will become clear that this is not exactly the image I wish to present.

America, Israel, and the Asads

Everyday narrations of immorality are not limited to engaging with a realm that is already (in the anthropologist’s view) ‘external’ to Syria. Indeed, some of the most common narrations related to me about the hidden machinations of the international world involved Syrian actors in some form or another. Or perhaps it is better said that

stories of Syria and its creation and development as a distinct identity feature major global figures, challenging academic notions of discernible ‘scale.’ I heard a variety of such narrations over the course of my research, and eventually I began to feel that each description of the ‘historical’ events of Syria was not a different tale nor even different versions of one tale, but that every telling was a different piece of the same story. As I listened to my informants telling me these stories, I began to see how all the little parts might fit into a larger framework. I saw the places where different versions overlapped, and I was able to connect and reposition them (in my head and more literally in my fieldnotes) into a single narration. As I was connecting these threads (or dots) into a single story, I realized I was reproducing the actions of my informants—I was constructing knowledge by relating various objects to each other, and, as was the case with many of my informants’ individual narrations, I was recreating the lines that someone else had drawn to use as my isolated objects. But as I suggested in the last chapter, this was not a ‘scale shift,’ but rather my taking Syrians’ narrations as objects-in-themselves and producing my knowledge about them accordingly. I have chosen here to present the fully assembled version of the narration in order to attempt to show how the temporariness of individual narrations can be repeated by single and multiple individuals and thus gain the effect of permanence. The result is a popular (hi)story that is ‘known’ (*maʿrūf*) by everyone (or at least, all of my informants).

This narration is, first and foremost, the story of how Hafez al-Asad came to be the leader of Syria and begins roughly in 1967. Though Asad is the primary character, it does not feature Syria alone, but includes Israel and the United States (despite the fact that Syria was much more involved with the Soviet Union during this Cold War era). At the heart of the story lie money, resources, power, and the Golan Heights. Rather than telling the narration in my own words, I will try to let my informants speak more directly. The completed version below is an assemblage of many different voices that span over the course of an entire year. It is a story compiled of narrations, so I include the narrative differences where they appear. If the style of the telling changes, it is *because* it was never presented as a complete story. Stylistically, I use the first person to indicate moments when my informants switched from a purely conceptual to a more personal narrative, tying their own and family histories into the greater story. Allowing myself to shift through these styles is the best attempt I can think of for representing the very diverse voices of the

informants who shared (and created) their knowledge with me. From upper-middle class Sunnis to working-class Shi'as to Christian gold merchants, my informants covered a wide range of economic, religious, social, national, and educational groups within Syria. And yet the story was always the same, regardless of who was telling it.

'How Asad Came into Power': A Narration

"In 1967, Syria lost control of the Golan Heights to Israel. Hafez al-Asad was the Minister of Defense at the time. The Israelis were dropping bombs in the area, but Hafez declared that the region was lost and the troops had to pull out before even *one* Israeli soldier had set foot in it. He gave it up before it had even begun to be taken, despite the fact it's defensible. Only a few residents stayed and tried to defend their homes, but most aside from the Druze (who stayed and acquiesced to the new Israeli regime) moved closer to the safety of Damascus. The Israelis moved in and had no trouble taking a virtually undefended area. Hafez al-Asad gave up the Golan Heights.

"All this is *ma'arūf*. My cousin was in the military at the time, working in the Golan, in the Special Forces. He and his company had moved into Golan to a high hill where they could see a long distance. They reported back their position and said that they saw no sign of Israeli soldiers in the area. They were then given the direct order to fall back to the border of Syria. They assumed that it was because the leaders wanted to send in regular military and not put their Special Forces in danger, but when they arrived, they were given a month's prison sentence for having gone beyond the bounds of permission. The military leaders didn't want anybody in there, Israeli presence or no.

"What was the result? In return for giving up the Golan Heights, Hafez al-Asad was helped into power and allowed and even aided to stay there, by the Americans and the Israelis. The U.S. could have ousted Hafez al-Asad, but on condition of a stalemate with Israel, the regime was allowed to remain. Even during the Lebanese civil war, the regime working with the Americans—we only went in there because the U.S. gave us the 'green light' to do so. They didn't want to get directly involved, but they didn't want Lebanon tearing itself apart either, so they used the Syrians.

“And it wasn’t just Asad who came to power because of hidden American support, but his entire Alawi clan from up in the mountains,⁷⁷ even though they don’t deserve it—they’re cowards. My father personally saw various regiment *leaders* who were Alawi take off running from the front lines during war, running away from the battle. What an injustice it is that many of these same cowards later became very high officials when the Asads came into power, because he populated his bureaucracy with people from his own religion. So all these backward, cowardly people are in charge of the country now, just because the U.S. and Israel decided to put them in power.

“The surest sign that those in power here always were and still are working with the Israelis and Americans, is that today *Syrian* soldiers patrol the edge of the Golan border and do not allow other *Syrians* to cross it. I did my army service by the border of Israel, where we could wave at the Israeli soldiers on the other side, but weren’t allowed to let Syrians by. Regular (i.e. non-military) Syrians aren’t even allowed to get near that border without permission, so the regime can make sure that no idealist with ideas of returning the Golan to Syria can get into the area to make trouble. Basically they are ensuring that Golan remains in the hands of Israel.

“Why? It’s all about compromise. Asad makes sure that that area remains in Israeli hands and he is assured that he will not be removed from power by any external sources—it is not in America and Israel’s best interest to have a new leader in power as long as they can control this one. There’s this unofficial peace, or at least ceasefire, and that’s why the U.S. will leave the Asads in power, and why the regime doesn’t have to respond to international calls for democratic reform. And while the press might say that Syria and America/Israel are at odds, that’s only because they feel they have to, and no one actually believes it. Most Syrians don’t actually think that America would ever invade Syria—in fact, things are much better than they appear on the surface between the two countries and Syria doesn’t do anything without consulting the U.S. first. And it’s the same thing with Israel—the Asad regime is probably having personal talks with Sharon, they’re just secret. It’s smarter that way. Really though, all of the governments in this region, including Syria, are working together to keep things in the state of pretend war that they are in now—it’s *ma^crūf* that it’s to everyone’s advantage if there is no open peace. That way all the

⁷⁷ Cf. Kymlicka (2004:155) who says of Eastern and Central Europe: “it is typically the majority that feels it has been the victim of oppression, often at the hands of their minorities, acting in collaboration with foreign enemies.”

powerful people can continue to make money and it gives them justification for keeping up the strong military force that lets them stay in power.⁷⁸

“That’s what the Asads gain—the assurance that the U.S. and Israel will not do to them what they did to Saddam Hussein in Iraq and give the Alawis and the Ba’th party an excuse to maintain a strong military. But what exactly does America stand to gain by getting involved in Syria like this? It’s a well-known secret that Syria actually does have quite a large oil reserve out near the Iraqi border. If you drive up there at night, you can see all of the burn-off towers from the drilling sites. But no one knows about it outside of Syria. The regime controls it and makes all the money off of it, by selling it to the Americans without telling anyone. They keep all the money and the U.S. gets the oil. It’s a good deal for both of them. They hide it and keep it secret, but everyone here knows the truth. It’s *ma’rūf*.”

Exposing the Regime

One possible analysis, possibly an overly predictable one, would examine this narrations in terms of understanding what is about. Such an interpretation would likely read it as a way for the disenfranchised Syrian population to discursively engage in a process of political power that they do not otherwise have access to. They might be powerless, but at least they are ‘in the know.’ It would argue, in a conspiratorial vein, that “power sometimes hides itself from view, but...conspires to fulfill its objectives” and can sometimes “produce visible outcomes” (Sanders and West 2003:6). Power, here, seems to refer to political-economic capital and is accompanied by agency to effect desired outcomes. The narration would thus expose (rather than create, as I would argue) a structural Us versus Them dichotomy, with all power and agency resting in Their hands. We might even say that these narrations actually are a form of “everyday resistance” whereby middle class Syrians were able to challenge the legitimacy of the regime by associating its members with the ultimate enemies of Syria, namely the U.S. and Israel. Not only are the Asads guilty by association, they might also appear as puppet-figures, who were created and whose string are pulled by these foreign countries, thus making them illegitimate as leaders

⁷⁸ Wedeen (2003:696-7) notes a similar situation in Yemen where a national spectacle involved the display of tanks suggesting “Yemen’s defense forces might have *domestic* uses for the tank” (my emphasis). This also traces back to Ibn Khaldoun (2005:40), who asserts that in the workings of society “authority exists through the army.”

in the popular conception (cf. Lavie 1990). All that ordinary Syrians have is their moral superiority and outrage.

One major problem with such an interpretation is that it is predicated on the idea that Syrians who are not involved in the government are distinctly separate from it, a stance that may or may not be wholly appropriate and an idea that I will return to in Chapters 5 and 6. To get around this, I would like to examine the narration instead in terms of what it ‘does.’ Once again, I find it helpful to consider this narration in the light of making connections, doing relations, and constructing knowledge. However, to consider such a possibility requires that we first approach this concept of the “disenfranchised” and turn it on its head somewhat.

Many analyses of ‘political’ topics, such as conspiracy theory, the state, relations between the global and the local, etc., quietly assume that anyone not directly involved in the processes of power is somehow ‘external’ to that power, or at best, on the “margins” of it (Tsing 1993). The ‘insiders’ are the few, the elite who ‘possess’ power⁷⁹ and usually the know-how to use it. They exist in contrast to the disenfranchised masses, who are outside trying to look in, partially leading to modernity’s concern with transparency (cf. West and Sanders 2003) and the ensuing accountability (cf. Maurer 2002). However, in a sense, my Syrian informants did not seem overly interested in transparency or in making the Syrian regime accountable, at least not in the “official” sense that we are used to dealing with.⁸⁰ They expect corruption and hidden power, and while they did make moral judgments, there was rarely the sense that they were morally outraged rather than just frustrated. Transparency and accountability are perhaps, then, more a concern of the already privileged, if by privileged we mean people who have the ability to impact their objects of study—bankers, international organizations, governments, academics, etc. To those of us busy being ‘objective,’ the people who are not involved in the processes that we are so desperately trying to transpar-ify are the ones we delimit as ‘outside’ or marginal. However, though ordinary Syrians were aware that they were not involved in the political machine (officially), they did not live their lives as if they considered themselves to be ‘external’ people. In other words, the government

⁷⁹ See Strathern (2004, 2005) for a consideration of whether and how the conceptual can be owned or possessed.

⁸⁰ While not seeming to be concerned with the regime being made accountable on official levels (i.e. openly or transparently), the narrators themselves are providing their own accounts of political transactions.

apparatus is not the central framework for their lives; if anything, *it* is external to *them*, indicating that perhaps social scientists (and politicians, theorists, etc.) need to consider the possibility that how we conceive of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ may not accurately reflect people’s lived experiences and knowledge.

If, then, Syrian speakers are ‘inside’ as far as they see themselves, how do they relate the figures in this narration to themselves? Where and how might these figures feature in their own lives? Once again, America and Israel are very foreign, being created as manipulative and interfering outsiders, intent on ruling the Arab Middle East in one form or another. But the other major actors according to the narration are from the Syrian regime, and through *their* connections to the outsiders, are also (re)created as being somewhat external to my informants. Not only Hafez al-Asad specifically is disconnected, but the entire Alawi sect. They are accused of being cowards, of running “in the wrong direction...towards a further loss of face” (Gilsenan 1996:198), rhetorical devices that would be used to insult and discredit an enemy or an object of ridicule. Indeed, even Hafez al-Asad used this rhetoric, saying of the 1963 Ba’th revolution that the officers at the Air Force base he took over “could have resisted—the forces at their command were stronger than my small unit. But they were *cowards*” (quoted in Seale 1988:77, my emphasis). Cowardice, as a negative quality, serves to distinguish the speakers from their subjects along moralistic lines.

But it could be argued that this division merely follows the lines of political power in Syria, perhaps merely reaffirming a People/Regime antagonism. However, there is one other relevant category of people in the narration, only briefly mentioned—the Syrian Druze who were living in the Golan Heights when it was ‘lost.’ They were said to have accepted Israeli rule without a fight. Indeed, some of my informants claimed that the Druze were much happier to live under the Israelis, even though they were technically still Syrian. The Druze, I was told by one Sunni informant, are the “cousins” of the Jews, so they get along well. Such an assessment not only places the Golan Druze population ‘outside’ (or at least, *more* outside than other Syrians), it also creates a disconnection between ‘Syrians’ and the Druzi people who still live in Syria. Or, conversely, if the Syrians and Druze are somewhat connected by both being Syrians, and the Druze and the Israelis are “like cousins,” there is also a possible connection being made between Syrians and Israelis, though it is a distant relation. So not only have we seen moments that challenge (as well as

moments that assert) a Muslim or Arab category, but now we see the same happening with ‘Syrian’ as well.

Entextualization, Contextualization, and More (Dis)Connections

What did vary in this narration as compared to the other ones I have explored thus far was the regular inclusion of familial and therefore personal histories intertwined with the rest of the stories. Anderson (1996) argues that this is a process of entextualization where there is a regular incorporation of small events into a grand “meta-narrative”—of conspiracy theory in his case:

Entextualization moves from speculation to institutionalization, as context is sloughed off, leaving only a purified text that can stand on its own, tell its own story or confer meaning on less exalted stories by associating them with its own. Entextualization is how we arrive at the broader significance of things (1996:97).

Personal and familial histories could thus be seen as relating to a broader meta-narrative, granting them a degree of importance they may not have had on their own.

However, I would argue that the personal stories are also part of a Syrian process of *contextualization*. That I encountered similar narrations described so many times in so many different settings indicates that it was common knowledge, as my informants themselves kept insisting. And while the entextualization of personal stories into the broader one may have been part of what was going on, it also felt as though the personal stories were a way to bring such a massive and distant story into some sort of comprehensible and tangible form. Individual connections in the narrations offered a way of validating such a grand and abstract analysis. Punctuating a description of international intrigues with “My uncle was there and saw this” and “My grandfather’s brother was thrown in prison because he knew that” provided concrete ‘proof.’ This was especially important when talking to a dubious-looking anthropologist (or to people with a disposition to doubt). So while little stories were made remote and slotted into a larger “meta-narrative,” it is possible that the reverse was happening simultaneously, that this big, distant theory was made all the more real because flesh-and-blood stories could be pulled down out of it and presented as evidence.

Performatively, these personalized narrations can also be read as another instance of making connections, of individuals using interpersonal connections to position themselves in relation to expansive political scenes—right in the middle of them, in fact. Perhaps these people are not as “marginal” as we might have thought. In this contextualizing sense, personal stories did not only act as a form of validation, but they also ‘did’ relations between specific persons and families and the broader situation. The soldier witness is, for the speaker, ‘inside’ because he is family. But even while the regime is somewhat external to the speaker in the narrations because of their cowardice, the soldier complicates this distance. The soldier is *implicated in* the regime by virtue of his being in the regime’s military. He is external to the regime officials (he was jailed after all), but is internal because he depended on them for his livelihood. In fact, the money that he brought in supported his family and has ultimately helped to care for the narrator himself. Whether the narrators like it or not, then, they connect themselves to the regime as well, and the regime is moved ‘inside.’ So these personal stories, whether entextualized or contextualized, are also another way to do relations. My informants did not have to tell me about their or their family’s ties to the regime. They chose to include these stories, which, intentionally or otherwise, showed me how they were connected to the regime that they (seem to) so despise.

The Gold Industry: In and Out of the “Regime”

From the machinations of global politics, I am now going to take a drastic turn and move to look at the realm of economics. However, rather than approaching how the regime is engaged through national-level economics, I intend to focus on a form of everyday finances—specifically the gold trade—to see how experiences and narrations of gold can be as much a part of relating to the regime as those of international conspiracy. As throughout much of the Middle East, gold is a very common form of wealth in Syria, usually as women’s jewelry. It is portable and substantive, and because it is tied to the global marketplace rather than the country-issued currency, it is a more risk-free currency. When the value of the Syrian lira fell rapidly in the early 1980’s, gold shop owners were some of the few Syrians whose wealth did not decrease proportionally because theirs was an international currency. Further, because interest-making on money is forbidden in Islam, there is not a great

deal of bank use in Syria. Gold is not immediately useable to purchase daily goods (pieces must be sold off in a gold shop for cash), and so it can serve as a form of unspendable savings. At a wedding, the families of the bride and groom will heap piles of gold jewelry on the bride as gifts, to give her a savings for herself and her family, a custom that I observed at both Muslim and Christian weddings.



Figure 4: An internal alley in the “Gold Suq”

The gold shops themselves are individually owned and operated, but a large number of them are concentrated in what is unofficially called the ‘Gold Suq’ (Figure 4), which lies several streets behind the main shopping *sūq* (Suq Hamidīya) in the Old City. The shop owners are mostly (about 75%) Christian in this area and are arranged into a loose guild that works to keep the prices uniform and theft to a minimum. Each shop is fairly small, roughly 3 by 4 meters, and filled with rows upon rows of bracelets, earrings, pendants, and a smattering of full jewelry sets, most locally-made, but some imported from the Gulf or occasionally even Europe. 18 and 21 karat yellow gold is the most popular, though there is also some white gold and pieces of lower quality. The silver trade is completely independent and those dealers are located elsewhere; similarly, the gold dealers do not usually handle jewels. An average 21

karat bangle can range in price from about \$100 US for a hollow one up to \$200 US for a heavy one.⁸¹ The price per gram of gold varies by the day, fluctuating according to international market prices. News of daily prices quickly filters by word of mouth and mobile phones from shop to shop in the morning.

An average day will see a very regular flow of customers, mostly from the lower to middle classes, some buying and some selling, moving from shop to shop, bargaining, pleading and calling on Allah to get the best price as the owners do the same. Some find a shop they trust and become regulars, sometimes coming in several times a week to exchange back and forth. Most of these customers are women, since the jewelry will often be (ostensibly) their property. The majority of them are Muslim, and move about the streets in degrees of cover often (though not always) inversely proportional to their financial status. Sometimes they come alone, more often in pairs or small groups of family and friends. Men do come in as well, though frequently either with their wives or fiancées. Occasionally goldsmiths or their representatives will drop by, exchanging old gold for new, sometimes coming down from Aleppo, which has a higher concentration of gold makers than Damascus. And once in a great while, someone will come looking for something slightly more illegal. But overall, a day in a gold shop will see some very large sums of money changing hands, largely free of any regime interference.⁸²

Hidden Treasure

Aside from being one of the primary ways to store wealth, gold is a common theme in Syrian storytelling. According to popular legend, when the Ottomans had to leave the greater Syrian area after World War I, they did so in a hurry, but the landowners fully believed that they would be returning to their homes. So rather than take all of their wealth and possessions with them and risk losing everything to bandits, many of them buried caches of their gold—in the form of coins—in secret locations throughout the country. When they never returned, all record of where the gold was hidden was lost.

⁸¹ A full set of bangles in Syria is six, a number that, I was told, varies according to local custom—in parts of North Africa, a full set would be seven bangles.

⁸² Which is not for a lack of trying. One shop owner, Issam, informed me that the government once tried to impose a 10% sales tax on all gold, but the guild rose up and protested vehemently, saying that to do so effectively cut out their profits and the subsequent rise in gold prices would then drive everyone to Lebanon. This was one of the few examples I heard of the regime actually bowing to a public outcry, and the tax was shortly removed. Issam said they are planning to try and reinstate it, but at the much more acceptable rate of 1% of the sale.

But vast troves of wealth still remain buried in the earth, waiting to be found. While I never met anyone who had actually found such a stash, there were stories about farmers who had done so while plowing their fields or people who had while exploring in caves; these stories were quite popular among a broad range of middle class informants. No one, as far as I knew, actively went out hunting for this buried treasure, but there were a number of people who were certain they knew where some was and were just waiting for the opportune moment to dig it up without being noticed. It is hard to say how much truth there was to these stories, but there was certainly some, because a Presidential decree some years ago declared that any such hoards found are supposed to be taken to the regime and melted down, basically “contributing to the regime’s cash box,” as one informant put it.⁸³ To make sure that any gold found would be turned over to government officials, the buying and selling of the Ottoman coins was made illegal and anyone caught trafficking in them, even as few as three or four coins, could face a hefty fine, prison time, and the loss of their shop in the case of gold dealers.

However, despite such legal restrictions, I got to see a number of these coins in a gold shop. Each one is small, less than an inch in diameter and is made of 22 karat gold. They cost roughly \$100 US (5,000 Syrian lira) apiece. The buried finds were reputed to contain hundreds, if not thousands, of these coins, but shop owners tended to keep their collections small, usually holding no more than 15-20 at a time, and even then only at irregular intervals. Most customers never knew of their existence, and of those who asked about them, it was only those with personal connections or credentials who managed to convince the shop owners to trust them. If someone came looking without such references, the dealer would calmly tell the customer that he did not have any, nor did anyone he knew, and remind the customer that trade in the coins was illegal. “You can never be sure when they might be secret police, sent around to try and catch us out. It’s a dangerous business.” The owner of the gold shop was a Christian who sat on the wealthier side of the middle class named Issam; he said that he had never dealt with a massive trove, though he would know how—“If you can’t leave the country, your only real option is to melt it down and sell

⁸³ Note that the UK has a similar law, specifically the Treasure Act, whereby any large troves comprised of silver or gold, buried with the intention to be recovered, and with no known owners or heirs is considered to be property of the crown. The finder and land owner are generally rewarded with some form of compensation, though the specifics of this are ultimately up to the Secretary of State. (Treasure Act 1996)

the unmarked gold at the market rate. But if you can get it out of the country, you'll make a small fortune because people will pay for the antique value." Issam mostly dealt small-time, with the same couple of people. These coins are the hardest form of currency; their value has not changed in almost one hundred years; and aside from the gold shop where it was purchased, it was almost impossible to turn back into cash—the ultimate savings account, if necessarily secretive. I asked Issam if it was so dangerous, why he dealt in them.

Because it's really a shame to hand them over to the regime and have them melted down. They're historical, antiques, part of our history and they just destroy them. And then they don't even give people the money for them. You're just expected to hand them over for nothing, which is stupid. If it's your land and you find them, you should get to keep them. Or sell them. Or at least get *something* for them. I mean, it's a bit of a black market for them, but that's the regime's fault. If they hadn't made it illegal, people would be doing it openly and there would be a lot more gold and money changing hands. It's especially not fair for people who maybe have some coins because they've had them in the family for years. Maybe my great-grandfather worked for the Ottomans and some of the coins became family heirlooms. Now, if I want to sell them, I can't, even though I didn't find them in the earth, even though they were always in my family. It's not fair—with this law the regime is stealing from its own people.

And while, as I said, no one was actively searching out this gold, it remained in the background of people's lives as a get-rich-quick scheme. Sometimes there were strange forces at work, stopping any discovery of hidden gold—one friend assured me that she knew there was gold buried in the foundations of her rather typical house in Rukn al-Diin (see Introduction for a description of this area). Her aunt had married a man who was well-versed in the mystical arts and he had pointed to a corner of my friend's room and told them there was gold buried there. My friend and her younger brother began to dig a hole to see. But when they got to the depth of about a meter, blue flies began to appear as if by magic out of the ground so, terrified, they quickly refilled the hole. As they told me these stories, I looked for a gleam in their eyes that would indicate they were joking with me, but both looked at me in dead earnestness, and their parents nodded solemnly in agreement. For a family on the slightly lower end of the middle class, finding such a treasure would no doubt be a godsend, a way to solve their financial difficulties.

However most stories of treasure stayed away from the mystical. Usually it is the regime, not mysterious flies, that keep people from getting access to the gold. All

sorts of people ‘knew’ where there was a cache, but were hesitant to dig it up because the regime was watching like a hawk, ready to swoop down and claim the wealth for itself. One informant told me that while he had been on an archaeological dig, the caretaker of the site had told him that he knew there was buried Ottoman gold just beyond the site. He had found a couple of pieces, which indicated there were likely more nearby. The problem was that the regime knew that he knew something and had been watching him nonstop, so he was unable to dig it up. But the moment they had their backs turned, he intended to get it and make his fortune. Similarly, many people who told such stories had given a great deal of thought to the matter, indicating they took the idea of gold discovery rather seriously. Specifically, many of them had very detailed plans as to how they would smuggle their theoretical treasure out of the country.

The stories where people actually did find gold often involved someone stumbling upon it by accident and then losing it all to the regime. One that was told to me, with an interesting twist, was the following:

A couple of months ago, a farmer was trying to make an irrigation pool, diverting some water into a little hole in the ground. But for some reason the hole was not filling as it should have been, no matter how much water was poured in. He decided to investigate and began digging, and soon found a treasure trove. However, he knew if he went to the authorities, they would steal everything. So he went to Damascus and demanded a visit with the President himself. There was a lot of grumbling about it, but he insisted that he had something *very* important to say and he would only talk to the president. Finally he got his audience and told Bashar about the gold, but the president only asked him why he hadn’t gone through the proper channels. The man explained that he had heard those channels were peopled with corrupt thieves and he was afraid if he had gone to them, they would have taken it all and left him with nothing, despite it being on his land and his discovery. So what did Bashar do? He gave the man a reward of a million lira (\$20,000) for bringing it forward, and promptly confiscated everything else, the worth of which would have been far more than a million lira. So the president left him with something, but still cheated him.

Nerve-Wracking Deals

Not long before I left Damascus, I had the chance to learn a little more about the Ottoman gold by witnessing a black-market transaction. The deal itself was actually part of an international chain of commerce, beginning in Syria and moving on to Turkey. In Turkey, owning such coins is not illegal, and there are some ‘clans’ that

still use the old lira (coins) as part of a bride price, supplied to would-be grooms by international dealers. One day, one of these dealers approached Issam's uncle and asked him to procure some coins for him (the two had known each other previously, though had not done business before). As Issam did not have any coins in his shop at the time, Issam and his uncle became middle-men who would gather coins from trusted contacts in Syria and then pass them on to the dealer. They managed to gather 42 and brought them into the shop while I was there, immediately hiding them. Issam's uncle, who was sweating profusely and looking very nervous, went back home, while Issam kept his cool and stayed in the shop to make the deal. He said that everyone in the chain of the deal was really on edge, from the initial owner of the coins (a family friend) to the international dealer. If, even after ten years, someone within that line-up had a falling out with the rest and decided to rat about the deal, all of them could wind up in prison. Needless to say, Issam eyed up many of the male customers coming into the shop that day rather suspiciously, not trusting anyone to *not* be a member of the secret police.

Shortly afterward, the dealer walked in and handed Issam 240,000 lira (a little less than \$5,000) and took the gold. Issam was still worried about being caught with the money, but less so than with the gold. A little while later, a young man came to pick up the money (minus Issam's commission, which was no more than he would have made off of bangles or other jewelry). Issam said he was probably the son of the man who had been the source of the coins in the first place. Once the deal was over, Issam visibly relaxed and called his uncle to let him know that all had gone smoothly. Later on, the international dealer called back and asked if Issam could produce any more, having decided that Issam was a trustworthy and reliable partner. Issam called his uncle and they began to see what more they could do, and a new set of business relations was born. I asked Issam at the end of it why he acted as a middle man if the money he took was not really worth the risk. "Like I said, the laws are stupid. I'm not going to worry about breaking a pointless law. It's as good a business as anything else, so why not?"

Gold Motifs

There are several motifs that become apparent in these stories of Ottoman treasure. Most simply, this gold was a get-rich-quick dream, the solution to all one's financial

problems, provided one was clever enough (a positive quality against a stronger opponent!) to spirit it away from under the eyes of the watchful regime. However, as narrations, they also critiqued the regime's laws that would take away something found on personal property with only minimal (if any) compensation. The dissatisfaction with and questioning of the fairness of the laws created a gap between the Syrian population and their largely unresponsive regime. Further, in Issam's case, his and the entire chain of black market gold dealers' refusal to abide by these laws because they were "stupid" (as well as being another source of income) effectively challenged the authority of the regime to make and enforce some kind of legal order. And breaking the law, in this case, was not seen to be an immoral act, as various narrators depicted the regime figures as "thieves" who effectively stole what they considered to be private property from the Syrian people to line their own pockets. Throughout these stories, there was always very much the sense that it was the *regime* that was actually doing something illegal by taking away the gold from its finders, or that legality and illegality lost a clear sense of definition since everyone seemed free to disregard the laws. The narrations then were challenging and even testing the moral capacity of the regime.

The refrain of the regime being made up of 'thieves' or 'criminals' also came up in a number of the above narrations, where officials were described as being involved in activities that are legally or perhaps morally 'wrong.' Through their narrations they depicted the regime as challenging its own authority as a law-maker by telling the population not to do something and then turning around and doing just that. But the story about the farmer adds something interesting to the mix—it includes President Bashar, someone that many stories and storytellers hesitated to involve so explicitly; the lines of dis/connection would usually be cut before reaching him. It exhibits a reoccurring duplexity in the ways that Syrians talked about their president—he was both dissociated from the 'thieves' that populate the ranks of his bureaucracy *and* placed firmly amongst them. Here, the farmer thinks, (somewhat naively, according to the narrator), that going straight to President Bashar will be the solution for unfair treatment and corruption. He obeys the laws, but goes straight to the top, thinking it will be uncorrupt. Bashar, the president of the country, is ultimately willing to take the time out of his busy day to meet this poor farmer and hear his story. But in the end, he still rips the farmer off, giving him substantially less compensation than the farmer could have gotten had he taken the gold to be sold in

the black market. The president then becomes the epitome of his criminal government, perhaps all the more so for being somewhat two-faced about it. But at the same time, there remains the fact that he *was* generous enough to give the farmer some money—and no small sum, by Syrian standards, which is more than the farmer would have ever received if he had gone through the proper channels. It would seem, then, that in the end, everyone who handled the wealth got a cut of the money.

So in one story, the president has both a ‘bad guy’ and a ‘good guy’ aspect to him. Rather than being a point of complication, such a dual sense fits smoothly into the model that I have heretofore been proposing, namely that by incorporating the concept of motion into our analysis, we can account for such multiple, shifting connections. Through these narrations and the process of illicit trading, the regime itself is set apart from ‘other’ Syrians. The ‘inside’ in this instance becomes those who were not involved in regime’s policies, who were more likely to be ripped off than to do the ripping off. President Bashar, as a singular leader figure, is both connected to the rest of the regime and distanced from it. He is, the narrations seemed to say, related to both the regime, but also to Us, in that he is generally a nice guy and cares about the popular welfare to an extent.

But there is a further moral complication. Several people in the narration took a share of the wealth, but no service was done in return as would be morally proper. Everyone involved, then, from the farmer up to the president was tainted by this immorality, by failing to follow the proper aesthetics for the circulation and earning of money (cf. Maurer 2002). It would seem that *all* humans might be subject to corruptive forces; we all have this connection between us.

The Thieving Regime

Eating Resources

Gold is not the only currency the Syrian regime deals with in a secretive manner. Syria is not well-known in the Middle East as a place that has much in the way of oil reserves or many natural resources at all. Nevertheless, as I mentioned in the section on the American-Israeli-Asad conspiracy theories, there is the “well-known secret” that Syria actually does have natural resources, including a fairly large oil deposit out near the Iraqi border, in an area of the country called *al-Jazīra* (‘The Island’ referring

to the region of Northeast Syria between the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers).⁸⁴ On a tourist trip up to the north of the country, I saw a number of natural gas burn-off lights glowing in the distance as we drove up the main highway in the area. On top of oil, there are (supposedly) large amounts of salt and jewels as well, but it is really the oil that is the most important—as mentioned, it is said to be what keeps America's interest in Syria strong, what keeps the whole power system of the Asad regime in place.

But, while taking a trip to the desert oasis of Palmyra, a well-educated Damascene friend of mine who had worked for as a geologist for an oil and natural gas company in Syria told me,

The fact is that politics and business go hand-in-hand. A couple of years ago, large amounts of natural gas deposits were discovered in the al-Jazira area. At that time, the government decided to open up bidding to the international community to see who would get drilling rights for it. There were three companies that bid—an American-Canadian company, a French one, and a Syrian national one. For political reasons, they initially decided to go with the American-Canadian group over the French, and not surprisingly, French-Syrian relations declined after that. However, with the political problems between the U.S. and Iraq, they ultimately decided to go with the Syrian company, after which point American-Syrian relations also soured. So, you see, it's all connected. If you don't help the businesses of other countries, they're going to start 'hating' you, at least publicly.

Political involvement in natural-resource economics was also described in more sinister ways, ones that reflected not just international relations, but also people's understanding and resentment of their own government. One day, I asked a Kurdish informant if he wanted an autonomous country for the Kurds. He replied that he would love to see it, but that it would never happen. The Kurds, especially in Syria, are highly concentrated in al-Jazira, which contains the best oil and salt deposits in the country *and* is a breadbasket for the country. There are massive numbers of wheat fields in the area, and farmers also grow a wide variety of grains, beans, fruits and vegetables. Much of this land was nationalized several decades ago, to the anger of the population there. I met one family who, over coffee, pulled out a stack of papers that were titles to several large tracts of land, which they felt had been unfairly stolen from them by the Ba'ath party. The theft had left them living in a small house in a small village with no real source of income, rather than working their own farmland

⁸⁴ Wedeen also makes mention of oil reserves recently located in Syria (1999:28).

and living a much wealthier life. A friend of mine working in the German Embassy in Damascus told me that many people from this region produce such entitlements, though it is hard to be sure of their validity. But because of the land's high productivity, my Kurdish friend told me, the regime will never give it back to its original owners. This also has the broader effect of ensuring there will never be a Kurdistan, as the Syrians will fight to keep it within their borders. Here, we see a narration where the inside/outside lines become even more select, where the inside is limited to people of Kurdish background, specifically those living in al-Jazira and who have had their land stolen from them.

Where, I asked, does all the supposed money made from these deals and lands go? To high-level officials who keep it in European bank accounts (like Arafat and other corrupt Palestinian leaders), I was told. One informant told me that Fodor's realistically needs to re-examine its list of the top ten richest people in the world, because, he suggested, four or five of them would probably be Syrian. "I mean, the vice president of the country has nine billion dollars in liquid assets alone that he keeps in a number of European banks." Another, unrelated informant told me that Rifaat al-Asad, the exiled brother of Hafez al-Asad, had been pardoned by Bashar, but has chosen to remain abroad, because he was living in the lap of luxury from money that he was given by his brother and/or stole from Syria. One of the only good things he did for the country, a Christian informant told me, was to build a road up to a Christian shrine on top of a mountain near Damascus, in order to make it accessible to pilgrims. Of course, this was after he and a company of his men landed a helicopter up there and robbed it of all it was worth.

There was also the story of Basel al-Asad, the brother of the current president, who was being groomed to take over the presidency after his father, but died in a car accident. After his death, it came to light that he had had over \$15 billion in a Swiss bank account, a gift from his father. The problem was that he died wife- and child-less, and the bank said that his money would be forfeit without any obvious heir. So the Syrian regime quickly came up with a number of (falsified) documents to prove that he had indeed been wed, to ensure that the money returned to Syrian hands. Or, rather, Alawi hands.

The narrator shook his head in anger—"the entire deficit of the country was less than what that one man had in his bank account." He cited these examples as proof that the country does indeed have natural resources like oil and gold, but that the government

hoards it all for itself.⁸⁵ And hoarding is decidedly not a virtue; it is not a part of the “aesthetic process” of doing morality (Jean-Klein, in press). This is similar to elements of Islamic banking where interest charging is banned, so that wealth can grow through *circulation* (cf. Maurer 2002 on Islamic banking). To be accused of being stingy (*bakhīl*), of keeping wealth to oneself is a fairly hefty accusation (c.f. Dresch 1989:59), even when leveled in (partial) jest.⁸⁶

It is worth briefly noting that though Jean-Klein (in press) outlines it nicely, casting morality as an aesthetic process is not necessarily an intuitive matter. I would argue that the basis for such a claim stems from the fact that it is only in the relating (i.e. telling) of a story, even if only to oneself, that the actions figuring in the story attain a moral status. The actions (or suspicions) within the story can be portrayed in multiple ways, thus allowing for multiple moralistic judgments. It is in following the proper aesthetic forms of *relating* (narrating) the story, that the actions within it become moral or immoral. An actor involved in the story may well know how he or she will be cast in the later telling of it (from personal experience of having been a teller of stories, as we all are) and thus may have a sense of how he or she will be judged (and thus whether the action is morally good or not). However, this surmising already involves a telling of the tale to oneself, thus producing knowledge (cf. Barth 1990) and already engaging in the aesthetic moral process. Such an understanding of morality would account for why, even today, Robin Hood and his merry men hold a morally superior status to a common thief who might steal in order to share the money with a group of lawless bandits (where the money might be for drugs, debts, gambling, hoarding etc.—see *The Damascene Robin Hood* in Chapter 7).

However, returning to the regime thieves, the focus of many of these narrations was not so much that there *were* natural resources in their country, but that despite technically being a Socialist country, ordinary Syrians never saw the profits of any of these resources. “The regime has control of everything and they don’t share

⁸⁵ Vom Bruck (2005:8) briefly mentions how similar rhetoric in Yemen served a delegitimizing role there.

⁸⁶ I discovered this the hard way. Early on in my fieldwork, I was walking home with some groceries and was invited to have tea with some friends. They instantly began poking through my bags asking what I had. When I did not immediately offer the contents to them, they began taking them, teasingly calling me stingy. When one saw my frustration, she leaned over and quietly told me that I was supposed to offer what I had, to be polite. So I sighed and told them to help themselves (*tfaddalu*). They grinned at me, said “no thank you” and put everything back. Lesson learned.

anything with the Syrian people.” One upper middle class friend originally from the city of Homs put it very eloquently:

There is a real feeling here like the regime is a mother eating her own children (*mitl umm, hiya ʿam takul awlādha*). I, and others, feel that the people in power, the Alawis, the Baʿth party, have taken advantage of their positions. They got very rich based on the work of the ordinary people (*il-nās al-ʿādiyyīn*) while doing nothing for us. They robbed the country—took all the resources and sold them to make money for themselves only. They’re eating us, the people, the land. And they give us nothing back.

The image of a mother eating her own children is a powerful one. Gilsenan (1996:308) describes a similar metaphor used in Lebanon by an informant who felt that his family had intentionally profited from his mistakes when they should have been restraining and taking care of him. In both cases, there is the notion that (older) family members are doing the eating, turning the notion of care-taking and responsibility on its head, as it is these same people who are meant to be *feeding*, not eating their ‘children.’ We return to the idea, then, that a country is like a family, with the government being the equivalent of a parent, and one who can profit from the loss of its children. This is a seemingly sharp divergence from many of the ideas we have been encountering in this chapter, where the regime has been externalized or disconnected. But despite being a critique, this image of a ‘mother eating her own children’ decidedly connects the regime to its population. Distance, disconnection and differentiation notwithstanding, the regime is (also) very close to Us—as close as family, even if they are irresponsible or criminal. Which is not to say that the distancing and disconnecting from the regime are any less powerful. The instances we have seen where the regime is positioned as wholly outside (beyond even the limits of family) are not invalidated by the regime also being positioned as inside. We are not looking at two sides of the same coin, I would argue, but at two different ways for people to relate to the regime that occur in (shifting) turns: one a connection, one a disconnection. The regime is never *really* family, but then again, it is never really *not* family, either.

Family Business

So again we encounter the theme of the Syrian government being made up of ‘criminals’ and ‘thieves.’ My informants would not always directly call the figures in these sets of narratives ‘thieves,’ but there were moments they did make such references explicit. For instance, while talking with an informant about the sense of national pride that a country’s flag can inspire, he said that the Syrian flag was only associated with various government buildings (where they frequently hang). Because everyone knew that those buildings are full of “thieves” (*ḥarāmiyah*), people began to correspondingly hate the flag as well, indicating that perhaps not only the heads of the regime are outsiders, but also civil servants. Criminality also frequently came up in relations to Syrian business, which was said to usually be directly related to the regime. Little shop owners and self-employed people would frequently have to deal with a wide number of officers and bureaucratic officials, a process that involved no little bribery (see Chapter 5 for more on bribery).

But big business was where the real crime was said to take place, specifically, the businesses of Rami Makhlouf (encountered briefly in Chapter 2). Makhlouf was a regular household name in Syria, one that everyone knew, but no one could really put a face to. He is a young man, in his mid-thirties at the time of writing, and is one of the wealthiest men in Syria. There are two mobile phone companies in Syria: Syriatel and 94 Areeba, and this one man was rumored to own both (indeed, most Syrians scoffed at the pretense of *two* companies, when they were in fact the same company with the same rates and same promotions, under the same management). He also owns the Duty-Free shop at the Syrian-Lebanese border. I recently read on a website that a decree was passed concerning Makhlouf and a business deal with Mercedes. Previously, the car company had dealt with Syrian middle men who were responsible for the distribution of all spare Mercedes parts in Syria. However, the new law stated that if Mercedes wants to deal in Syria, they *must* abandon their original partners and work with Makhlouf instead (Landis 2004). And the BBC website printed that, “according to a human rights activist, one member of parliament is serving a five-year prison sentence for criticizing [him]....Mr. Makhlouf is a key [economic] figure. Analysts say no foreign companies can do business in Syria without his consent”

(“Who’s Who in Syria’s Leadership” 2005). The regime itself was willing to make concessions to him. In fact, there was one joke that illustrates his perceived influence in Syria:

Bashar al-Asad went to Lebanon to visit Emile Lahoud, and he was stopped on the border by the Lebanese Army; the private asked for a form of ID, as he did not know who Bashar was. Upon seeing that the ID was from Lattakia⁸⁷, he asked: “Hey, Lattakia! Are you related to Rami Makhlouf?”

Another version went around where the Syrian President was trying to get some official paperwork done in Syria, and it was only upon recognizing that Bashar *was* related to the Makhlouf family that he was allowed to complete it with ease. And indeed, the two men are related. Aside from both being Alawi, the two are first cousins (Makhlouf is Bashar’s *ibn khāl*, mother’s brother’s son). There was no doubt among Syrians that Makhlouf got so rich at so young an age because of the heavy patronage and favoritist law-making of his cousin. Thus the biggest commercial business in Syria was tied very firmly to the regime.

There was also no question as to whether or not big business in Syria was considered to be criminal. There were daily gripes about the cost of mobile phone lines, and how they were fixed in order to get the most money out of people. When I first arrived, the system was such that to buy top-up cards (which most people used), one had to buy according to units used as well as time. For instance, one could buy a 400 unit card and it would last eight days. If either the units or the time expired, one had three days to top up before the line was disconnected, meaning a new one would have to be bought. It ensured people bought top-ups on a regular basis, regardless of whether they needed them or not, a fact people were aware of and upset about. However one day, while walking through the Old City, I saw that, overnight, a number of small garbage bins had appeared at strategic places throughout the neighborhoods. These bins were attached to walls and were obviously an effort to encourage people to clean up their city. I looked more closely at one and saw that it had a small Syriatel logo on it, which I took to mean that the company was trying to do something positive for its country. Several days later, I asked one of my friends who lived in the Old City about it and he groaned in disgust. He said it was awful that the company was doing that, that the ‘thieves’ were pretending to give something

⁸⁷ Lattakia is a region along the Northwest coast of Syria, from where the Alawi clan hails—which both Bashar al-Asad and Rami Makhlouf belong to.

back to Syrians; everyone knew that they were stealing and just doing this to make people look the other way. So even an apparent act of generosity can be (or can be received as) something ridden with bad intentions; it can be a lie, a cover-up, or a cold-hearted deception. Another friend (driving with his wife and children on the way to one of the said restaurants) assured me that it was a common practice to do nice things as cover-ups:

All of the restaurants outside the city make a great example. They look nice and fancy, but the owners really don't care at all about the restaurants—that's why the service is always so bad. Why? Because they are just fronts for illegal operations, they are a way for the owners to show the world that they are making money legally, while really they are running drugs or smuggling or stealing underneath.

Once again, the regime, and those closest to it, were seen to be involved in immoral actions, leaving their moral authority in question. Indeed, it seems that their integrity and honor as moral people is outright being challenged by these narrations.

The Mafia

Some of these descriptions had a very Mafia-esque feel to them. Indeed, while it was initially somewhat of a shock, by the end of my research I was no longer surprised at the regularity with which Syrians referred to their regime as being a 'Mafia.'⁸⁸ The term was pejorative and usually invoked the image of a powerful core family that monopolized control over money, resources, and the administration of violence. Rather than existing on the fringes of society and getting involved in politics only by secretly infiltrating or conspiring with the government (Navaro-Yashin 2002:172-3), the criminals *were* the government/regime. Listening to Syrians talk about their 'Mafia,' I got the impression of a Mafia that was very much like the one I have seen in movies such as *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas*, with the same Hollywood extravagance: constant engagement in illegal activities, front companies and restaurants, heavy 'drug'-trafficking, unswerving loyalty within the family, membership being restricted to family, living beyond the law, living in fabulous luxury, and the use of cinematic levels of violence and bloodshed, often with no more instigation than a personal dislike. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, *The Godfather* is a

⁸⁸ I do not know if it was done intentionally, but David Lesch, in his bibliography of Bashar al-Asad, directly compares Bashar to Michael Corleone from the *Godfather* movies (2005:2).

very popular film in Syria, though it is hard to say whether they have borrowed elements of the cinema to embellish their views of their regime, or whether they merely liked the film because they feel it so accurately catches the image of the world they know.⁸⁹ Either way, one informant summed up his opinion succinctly:

There are Mafias in power all over the Middle East, but the biggest one is here in Syria, with one family ruling everything. They are merciless, killing and throwing people in prison without hesitating. They don't care about their own laws. And nobody but the Alawis can really get involved in the ranks.

Like talk of criminals and thieves, the term 'Mafia' came up in a variety of situations, usually dealing with finances and resources. Below are several ethnographic excerpts that featured the rhetoric of Mafia.

A lot of the 'new money' in Syria comes from the Revolution, where big landowners, like my grandfather, lost their land to the regime. So the old families lost a lot of money and it basically all wound up with the Mafia families—the Alawis. For example, my brother wanted to buy a villa out in a new suburb. The guy selling it questioned him about where all of this money to buy a villa had come from. So, in return we asked how an early-retired military officer had managed to come to own so many villas on a salary of no more than 3500 lira a month. That shut him up.

Syria is going to hell. The economy, industry and agriculture have been ruined through mishandling. And there is massive corruption—I mean, we're run by a Mafia. Bribery is everywhere because wages are not high enough and there's a massive brain-drain because anyone who has the intelligence or money gets out of the country. Because there are no good jobs here for people, unless you can work for the regime. And you can only do that if you know someone, are related, or are rich enough to buy your way into a position.

But talk about the Mafia is also a way of explaining why there has been no change or reform in Syria, addressing the resource control that the regime exerts.

I would like to maybe change things here, but it would be impossible because the regime here is like the Mafia. Syria does have resources, but no one knows about them because the family in power has control of everything and shares nothing with the Syrian people.

[In Beirut with Syrian friends]: Yeah, the city here looks really nice. Construction actually gets done instead of just staying as scaffolding for years

⁸⁹ Reed (2003:60-61) describes the use of American cinematic names being adopted by gangs in Papua New Guinea, including one gang that called themselves the 'Mafia,' indicating that there may be a broader trend of incorporating foreign fictional elements (or at least portrayals) into everyday discourse. The Mafia seems to present a particularly romantic option.

and years. The problem in Syria is not that there is not the money there, just that it all gets sucked in by the Mafia and that even if there were people who cared to make a difference, they could not raise or keep the funds to do so.

After a while, I began to be curious about the terminology. One afternoon, Alia (one of the older women who had asked me about September 11th) and I were having a Sunday picnic and a drive in the hills outside Damascus, not talking much, just listening to a Frank Sinatra cassette. At one point she said that she had heard he was part of the Mafia. I replied that I had heard something like that. She then went on to say that they have an even worse Mafia in Syria. As she spoke fluent English and would often automatically translate complicated words into English for me, I asked her what the Arabic word for 'Mafia' was. She said there was none, it was just Mafia. I told her that a lot of people had mentioned the idea that the Syrian regime is a Mafia to me, and she said "Of course, that's because that's what we have here. Everyone knows."

Here, then, is another instance of narrations that challenge the regime's superiority. Or rather, while it openly acknowledges the regime's control, it challenges the moral underpinnings of the ruling group. The use of the term Mafia moves beyond mere thieving, into a somewhat darker image. The regime is made (out) to be a highly insular, self-serving *family*, one that is undyingly loyal to itself, but has no care for the rest of the population. And it is presented as violent, sometimes senseless, and always merciless, with a willingness to literally shed blood to retain its place in society. As the regime, the Mafia is visible in Syria, rather than being a shadowy set of figures running in the background of society. But, as we have seen, what is visible is not always considered to be trustworthy. And it was narrated to exist outside the moral boundaries. The regime is greedy, hoarding all of its wealth; its members take what is not theirs and offer nothing in return; and while there are moments of justified (or justifiable) violence, the regime engages in senseless, purely self-serving violence⁹⁰ that leaves people in fear of one another and their leaders. Here, then, is another example of Syrian narrations that disconnect the regime from the narrators.

⁹⁰ Examples of this would include the 1982 massacre at Hama and the numerous disappearances of suspected dissidents (cf. Lindisfarne 2000:39-45 for a fictional, but realistic account of political imprisonment). Such descriptions of this violence as being unjustified exists despite, or perhaps in spite of, official rhetoric that would paint it as the contrary (cf. Wedeen 1999:32-49).

David Kideckel (2004:140) notes that the Romanian ‘Mafia’ was composed of “informal paternalistic personal networks of clients, cronies, and kind.” Oppression and violence are not the only aspects of a Mafia—it also entails certain responsibilities, working in a patron-client style of favoritism that Kideckel suggests somewhat resembles a parent/child relationship (2004:140-1).⁹¹ While I would question the applicability of a patron-client framework in the ways that Syrians transacted in their everyday lives, the concept of a parent/child relationship reflects how Syrians themselves described their regime and thus may be more appropriate.⁹² The Mafia (as parent) is responsible not only for its own family, but for everyone living within its territory (i.e. its children). As long as the children/population accept the authority of the parent/Mafia, they will be protected from *external* drugs, gangs or violence. The relationship may be an uneasy and sometimes unwanted one, but it is effective nevertheless. In this light, Syrians’ narrating of the regime as a Mafia had both disconnective and connective aspects. The Mafia regime was both outside and inside, both like and not like ordinary Syrians. We are again returned to a shifting set of connections and disconnections within a single metaphor. The field of relations refuses to hold still.

Indirect Languages of Politics

An Archetype: The Bank Manager

The past several sections have focused on Syrians’ use of direct descriptions of the regime and the ways in which those descriptions both challenged the Syrian leadership and connected it to the population.⁹³ The final sections of this chapter, however, will look at other types of political languages, ones that are sometimes less immediately obvious that they are ‘political’ in nature. Loosely borrowing from Lavie’s (1990) exploration of the place of allegory in the formation of (a political)

⁹¹ I shall return to the idea of an intersection of patron/client and parent/child relations in Chapter 7.

⁹² Interestingly, the only relations I saw that might clearly fall under a patron-client rubric tended to be *within* family networks, where there was usually a more widely recognized distribution of power (with fathers and older male relatives positioned at the top of the hierarchy). Non-familial relations of favors seemed to occur between people of relatively equal status; they may have possessed different kinds of capital, but the ultimate transactions appeared to be of roughly equivalent value (cf. the sections on *wasta*’ in Chapters 5 and 6).

⁹³ Salamandra (2004) notes a similar trend whereby challenging is a central part of doing relations in Damascus, a through I shall elaborate on more fully over the next several chapters.

identity, I will look at how a popular archetypal figure in Syrian political discourse is involved in a similar process.

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered several archetypal figures that slowly developed over the course of numerous storytelling sessions. They were rarely associated with specific individuals, though individuals would occasionally be vaguely likened to specific archetypes. Similarly, the archetype figures themselves were not wholly concrete; what seemed to be diverse images would become a composite of a single one; one figure might contain plural figures. These archetypes served, in some instances, to allow the speaker to broach politically sensitive topics via a safe (as one never could be sure when the secret police were listening) and ‘invisible’ manipulation of metaphor and common knowledge. One such figure is relevant to my discussion here. Though I encountered him in different forms, it is to the description and story of what I am calling ‘the Bank Manager’ that I now turn.

Here in Damascus, things are a mess. Nothing is very well-organized and everything is poorly run. Many of our problems today are because of all the immigration into the city. Lots of poor farm folk came flocking to the city looking for jobs. This led to huge problems because this city was not designed to handle such a large population—look at it now, with all the neighborhoods expanding in all directions, most of them poor. And there are suddenly a lot of unqualified people here, edging out people with class, good origins, and education. I mean, a backwater farmer comes out of his village in the middle of nowhere and ends up in the city. Before he knows what’s happening, he is made the manager of a bank. He has no idea how to run it or what he is doing, but he suddenly has power and wants to use it. His instinctive reaction is to fill all of the positions beneath him with people from his own village, because they are all he knows. Not surprisingly, everything is a mess in the bank afterwards—he doesn’t know what he is doing and no one working under him knows what they are doing because they are all just backwards farmers at heart.

Here, then, we have an image of a country bumpkin coming into the city,⁹⁴ gaining a degree of power, and making a mess of things because he has not been educated to be able to handle himself in such a situation, nor do his origins (*aṣṭhu*) provide him with the natural potential (cf. Vom Bruck 2005, Dresch 1989). It is

⁹⁴ This urban versus rural divide is hardly uncommon in much of the Middle East, with each group usually describing themselves as being superior. Ruralites often will consider their urban counterparts as corrupt and immoral—this is even true of people in towns, as Meneley (1996) shows how the people of Zabid consider other Yemenis from big cities such as Aden or Sa’na to be immoral. Shyrock and Howell (2001) note how elite Jordanians rarely interact with (or wish to) rural tribesman; indeed the tribesman in Jordan are often considered to be backwards. The same holds true for urban descriptions of Yemeni tribesman (Caton 1990).

perhaps not surprising that these stories were told by middle class people of the city, people with a long family history of being from—if not Damascus itself—at least *a* city (one person who told me a story along this vein was my friend from Homs). These stories were often told over tea in their air-conditioned, New City homes or in trendy cafes or restaurants. The bank manager is a dismal character, portrayed as incompetent and ineffective. Yet at the same time, he is pitiable; it is not his entirely his fault he does not know how to do the job that has landed in his lap. He is out of his depth. Whereas, the story seems to say (though does not do so directly), someone from the city would have been a much better candidate, because he would have been more likely to have been properly trained for the job and city etiquette, and have an appropriately dignified background. What this story does, then, in terms of inside and outside, is to set people from the country (*rīf*) as distinct and external to people from the city (cf. Salamandra 2004:12-14). And they are not just external, but are narrated as being somewhat less civilized, a time-tested dichotomy central to Ibn Khaldoun's (2005) theory of political rule and society, hundreds of years ago.⁹⁵

However, I did say that this was also a method of 'talking' politics. For this to make sense, both the speaker and the listener had to be aware of certain facts, otherwise the effect was lost. Fortunately for most Syrians (if somewhat unfortunately for fresh anthropologists), all the necessary background was common knowledge. First, they had to understand the significance of the choice of the bank, as, say, the Ministry of Tourism would not make as strong an impact. For much of recent history, the only bank in Syria was the National Bank of Syria, a national institution. So one had to know that to talk about a high-ranking official in the bank hierarchy was effectively to talk about someone that the ruling regime put in place. If the highest level servants of the regime are less than competent, that says little for the regime as a whole.

The bank also serves as a double entendre, for it invites association to the idea of money, and the (absolute) control the regime was said to have over it. Not only does the regime 'steal' and hoard all the country's wealth, they then proceed to manage it incompetently. And in case it was not clear enough that it is the regime being implicated, there is the second bit of knowledge one needed: namely

⁹⁵ Though he seems to also bear a healthy respect for the 'Bedouin' peoples, describing them as stronger and more courageous than their more sedentary counterparts (Ibn Khaldoun 2005:91-95).

that the Alawi people have, for a long time, been a tough, but poor set of mountain farmers. In Syria, as in many places throughout the world, there is the belief that people living up in the mountains have nothing, live poor, and deal with the harshest conditions, while the people living in valleys and the cities are well-off and have the luxury to indulge themselves in occupations beyond hard labor. The city folk are therefore refined, cultured, and educated, while those from the mountain villages are tough and ignorant, certainly not fit for the delicate maneuverings required to rule. And as we have seen from the previous narrated histories, the Alawis came out of the mountains, took power (if only with the help of foreign conspirators), and promptly began to fill all of the high-ranking positions with their own people.

The city versus country divide suddenly doubles as a religious-ethnic one. In a duplicitous process, all non-Alawi city folk were narrated as insiders, while the mountain Alawis were made into outsiders. But not only were they outsiders, they were outsiders who were incapable of handling the positions they took. The regime's authority is once again being discursively challenged, this time on the grounds of ineptitude.

One last interesting note. While the narration of the bank manager seems to say that city folk (and thus non-Alawis) would be better prepared to handle the position of managing a bank, it is an idea that I never once heard made explicit. In fact, the distinct absence of such a statement struck me as far more telling than its inclusion might have done. But I shall return to this lack in Chapter 6.

The Power of Laughter

Humor can be another excellent, but indirect way of 'talking' politics and in Syria is also very much a part of the everyday routine of socializing. Lisa Wedeen (1999) has looked at the various ways in which humor in newsprint walks the line between what is politically acceptable. Using political cartoons, she argues that "the popularity of political satires and cartoons and the prevalence of jokes unfavorable to Asad tell us that although Syrians may not challenge power directly, neither do they uncritically accept the regime's version of reality" (1999:87). She casts them as an everyday form of resistance that also upholds the state through its adherence to the official censors. I fully agree that there are

deeper political connotations within humor, but it also spans broader territory than just censored cartoons, and it is primarily the *everyday* forms of humor that I will address here—mostly in the form of jokes and joking that criss-cross the social landscape.

The majority of joking is not political in nature. For instance, the city of Homs is effectively to Syria what the Deep South is to the United States, with equivalent numbers of ‘dumb Homs’ jokes—for example, in one joke, a Homs man finds a genie (*jinn*) and is granted one wish. He asks for the jinn to build a bridge from the desert to America. The jinn shakes his head and tells the Homs man to ask for something simpler, because such a bridge would be nearly impossible. The man then asks the jinn to make all Homs’ wise and knowledgeable. The jinn says, “I’ll get to work on that bridge.”

There are similar jokes for the Bedouin, as well as sheikh and priest jokes, simple puns, and language games. And there is the game of picking on whomever is present⁹⁶ that might seem the most susceptible (cf. Gilsenan 1996). In the case of this young, unmarried female anthropologist, there was no end of joking about marriage, with mothers and fathers laughingly saying they would marry me off to their sons. Or most of these moments were at least half in jest. But overall, exchanging jokes (and picking on people) seemed to form a core part of any social gathering, especially if there was not a television.

Of course, there were a great many jokes that *were* political in nature. Some were fairly clear to the uninitiated, some were more complex and only made sense if you had the appropriate background knowledge. Some were directly critical of individual figures, some were vaguer. But what they tended to share was this indirect quality. For those “in the know,” what was left unsaid and how cleverly the ‘real’ comment was disguised were what made the joke funny. To see how the politics, identity, challenges and connections/disconnections aspects can work in humor, I will give three popular jokes that I heard and explanation where necessary. But I will not attempt to analyze them, in order to maintain a faithfulness to how the humor part works, i.e. they were not meant to be translated into direct speech or explained. The jokes I have selected to include here tie in to the themes I have been discussing throughout this and other chapters, including

⁹⁶ Again, cleverness is acceptable when directed against an opponent who is present to be able to try and defend him or herself.

oppression, violence, identity-work, corruption, and Syrians' own reflexivity. I hope it will be apparent at this point how and why they are humorous. (N.b. the president's last name, Asad, means 'lion' in Arabic.)

There was a lion out in the wilderness and a hunter decided he was going to go take care of it. He loaded up his weapon and went out, took aim and shot, but missed. The lion came over, a bit upset, and told the man that he had two options: the lion could eat him or it could fuck him. The man thought about it, and selected the latter. The next day, he was really upset about the whole incident and decided to go out and try to kill the lion, now partly in revenge for what had happened. He aimed, shot, and again missed. The lion came over and offered the same options as before. The man was really upset, but again took the latter. The next day, he readied himself, dead set on killing the lion now, furious over the shame and humiliation. He found the lion, took a slow deep breath, carefully aimed, shot...and again missed. This time the lion came over and said "I'm beginning to think that you're not coming out here to kill me..."

There were two Sunni men who were interested in getting involved in politics, in getting ahead, so they decided they wanted to join the Alawis. They petitioned to do so and were told that they could, but that they had to swim from the beach to an island. It wasn't necessary that they do so, but they should try to help each other out, so they could both get ahead. If and when they arrived on the island, they would be allowed to become Alawi. So the two men stripped down and began to swim. They swam, but after a time it became apparent that one of the men was a better swimmer than the other, and he eventually reached the island first. When the second arrived, he was very tired and put up his hand to ask for help up to shore, but the first kicked him instead and said "Fuck you, you Sunni dog (*kis ikhtak* [lit. your sister's pussy], *ya kelb sunni*)."

An international commission was doing a poll to determine people's reactions to having the electricity being cut (*qaṭʿit kahārāba*). They first went to an American and said, "What is your opinion on power outages?" He replied, "What does 'electricity being cut' mean?" They then went to a Chinese man and asked him the same question. He replied, "What does 'electricity' mean?" Finally they went to a Syrian and asked him the same question. He replied, "What does 'my opinion' mean?"

5. Living the Regime (For Good or Ill)

The previous chapter examined some of the ways in which Syrians engaged their regime in an apparently negative fashion, using narrative techniques to challenge and test the regime's political and moral authority. Interestingly, as Jean-Klein (in press) points out, the Arabic word for challenge (*ithādad*) stems from the same root as the word for border or boundary (*ḥadd*, pl. *ḥadūd*). As we saw in that chapter, the process of doing relations, creating boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside' was also similarly a process of challenging. In this chapter, I intend to explore other ways in which Syrians engaged their regime during my fieldwork. The duplex nature of Syrians' relations with their regime reappears, as I examine how their lived experiences engendered both connections and disconnections. Navaro-Yashin (2002:119) has examined the role of public life in the recreation and maintenance of the Turkish state, but she somewhat limits herself to examining what are obviously 'statist' moments, i.e. instances where the population, by incorporating various state symbols into their actions, becomes "more statist than the state." In her account, she addresses how the public adopts official-like discourses and symbolism in a move that reifies the state *as* the state.

However, while Navaro-Yashin looks at how the state is constructed in *obviously* intentional ways, I intend to continue looking at the ways the state is engaged (or not) in intentional, but oblique ways. We, as anthropologists, can never know *a priori* precisely what practices or transactions we are observing. Moments that appear to be casual might be highly political, and moments that appear 'statist' might be anything but. Most of the examples I will explore here are everyday experiences where Syrians found themselves dealing with their regime in manners that were expected for them, but somewhat unexpected in the anthropological literature (though I will examine expected moments as well). By this I mean that the politics is not only popularly experienced in voting, rallies or hanging up posters of the president (cf. Wedeen 1999), but also in bribery, connections, the payment of taxes, and even in the space of homes.⁹⁷ These everyday encounters and the ways

⁹⁷ Handler (1988) similarly encourages us to look for signs, discourse and narratives of nationalism in non-political contexts as much as in 'big' political moments. While I very much agree with his

that people narrated them provided spaces where politics was ‘done’ (or not)—where connections were made, knowledge was (re)created, and the degrees of the regime’s distance ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ was constantly renegotiated.

Playing the Game: The Places and Spaces of Official Rhetoric

Lisa Wedeen (1999) provides a thorough account of the official and popular uses of rhetoric and symbolism during Hafez al-Asad’s reign in Syria. She suggests that the “cult of Asad,” as an officially constructed entity, served to recreate the regime through the engineering of and the active ability to enforce compliance and obedience in the Syrian population (i.e. the development of a “politics of ‘as if’”). She primarily focuses on regime-directed aspects of the cult, while looking at the popular consumption of this official rhetoric and how its subversion could be a form of resistance. Similarly, I shall begin this chapter by looking at such subversive uses of expected political spaces, but without presupposing either a statist/resistance framework or that what Syrians were doing lined up with what observers might think they were doing. I also intend to see how everyday experience and understanding of regime paraphernalia provided further spaces of connecting to or challenging the regime.

An Exchange of Rallies

With the death of Rafik Hariri in 2005, relations between Syria and Lebanon took a sharp turn away from their previous state of a quiet, but stable tension. Not long after the assassination, there were a number of political rallies in Lebanon, some demanding the removal of Syrian interference from Lebanese politics and some supporting Syria’s presence. Inspired by the Hezbollah-led, pro-Syrian rally in Beirut, a corresponding rally took place in Damascus in March 2005 to support President Bashar al-Asad in his decision to remove Syrian troops from Lebanon. Estimates of the number of attendees ranged from tens to hundreds of thousands.

sentiment, I am not wholly convinced that any moment that activates or narrates nationalism could truly be considered anything *but* political in nature. Perhaps it is not, or would not be described as, *explicitly* ‘political’, but I would argue that by ‘doing’ politics (vis-à-vis nationalism), it becomes political, even if only in the analyst’s eyes.

Syrian (and Ba^cth) flags were waved, slogans were chanted, and the president himself stood watching and waving from a nearby balcony. Major businesses and schools were closed; many small businesses closed out of respect. Prior to the rally itself, small spontaneous parades—caravans of six or seven cars—drove about the streets wildly, with the men (I saw no women in these parades) cheering enthusiastically, waving flags, and honking horns in a manner not dissimilar to the car parades-cum-road rallies that escort a bride and groom to their new home after their wedding. Similarly, younger groups of *shebāb* (young men) wandered through the streets with flags. I passed one of these smaller gangs while walking in the Old City, and one boy (whom I had never seen before) turned and said to me in English, “America, get out!” before walking on. The streets were all but empty aside from these enthusiasts, leaving the city feeling eerily abandoned despite being midday on an otherwise normal Wednesday. Many of my Syrian friends were distraught when I told them I was considering attending the rally, saying that they were sure it would not turn violent, but if it did, it was the last place an American should be. They were so upset, that I decided not to go out of consideration for them. However I watched news reports of it, read internet and newspaper comments on it, and asked my friends who saw it to describe it to me (one of whom was Egyptian and thought the whole thing rather funny).

Wedeen (1999:68) remarks that rallies in Syria were known for having mandatory attendance. School students were bussed in, as were civil servants and employees of other big businesses. My informants, too, said that such was the case of regime-sponsored rallies. They were not so much demonstrations of actual loyalty as part of the job description. And yet, most added, the one in March 2005 was somewhat different. One informant estimated that possibly as many as half of the demonstrators were there of their own free will.⁹⁸ But by the same token, many other people chose to stay home. One of these latter, a small business owner of a shop in the Old City, said that he had chosen to take the day off. It was best if he closed his shop, to give an appearance of support and respect, but used it as an excuse for a rare holiday. He said he felt bad for some of the employees of bigger corporations. “I

⁹⁸ Though there were other Syrians who were more cynical. An anonymous reply on Landis’ (2005) *SyriaComment* blog post for the day read “In the last fourty years, there has'nt been a real spontaneous gathering except when the great poet Nizar kabani died. And i think everybody Knows that (*sic*).”

don't believe in what they're saying at that rally and most of them don't either. But I get the choice to go home because I'm my own boss. They're stuck." And yet he chose to close his shop, indicating, as Wedeen would contend, that the regime was able to enforce its will upon the population via a politics of 'as if,' whereby people still felt compelled to play by the rules of the game. But Syrians themselves were also aware of this coerced complicity. A lower middle-class university student who lived who lived with his parents and brothers in a 'traditional' house in the Old City (See Introduction, pg. 3) told me that

Every one of those shopowners who closed because of the rallies is a 'motherfucker' (*sic*). They don't do it because they support Bashar, but because they're cowards (*jubna*'). They're afraid that the *mukhābarāt* will notice and then they'll be in trouble. They're afraid to lose what they have, so they just go along with the crowd. And it's the regime's fault. Everyone knows someone who disappeared in the night for disagreeing and so people are afraid and do what the regime wants.

This expectation of observation also provided a possible explanation for the boy who told me to 'get out.' I told a friend about that incident and she said not to worry, that it was likely that the boy had a father or an uncle who worked for the secret police and he was hoping that if he was reported saying such things, he might put himself in good standing for a career in the secret police.

We can read a number of different connections into these various experiences of the pro-Bashar rally. For those who attended the demonstration, there were strong connections being made, whether ideological (for those present voluntarily) or practical (for those whose attendance was mandatory). The regime became 'insiders,' as Syrians asserted their pride and loyalty, thereby actively (re)creating themselves and the regime as 'Syrians.' The smaller, groups driving about the city were making similar connections. For those like the shopowner who took the day off, the connections were somewhat less clear-cut. He was decidedly disconnecting himself from the regime and those participating in the demonstration, dismissing the spectacle as a charade. Yet, by choosing to close his shop, he was still participating in the regime's spectacle by keeping to the expected forms. He was challenging the authenticity of the regime's organized affair, but was acceding to the expectations of

a ‘good citizen.’⁹⁹ The informant who disapproved of the shopowners was disconnecting himself from the regime, rally participants, and the complicit bystanders. He was challenging not only the regime, by not attending, but also the authenticity of the shopowners, by declaring that the latter were cowards for refusing to stand up for what they claimed to believe (which would presumably require a shopowner to keep his shop open). He did admit that disconnecting from the regime could be dangerous. The final commentator, who assured me that the scolding I received was nothing more than a boy creating job options for himself, was herself identifying the various connections that this demonstration brought to light. She realized that much of the demonstrating consisted of people doing what they felt they were supposed to in order to best connect themselves to the regime. But the rally not only created a space for ideological dis/connections to be activated, but also for personal ones. A rally, and the warm-up to it, were as much about job options as about political idealism.

That personal connections had a part in a political rally was not uncommon. There were a number of other, smaller demonstrations that took place while I was in Damascus, on various issues from protesting regime policies to supporting the Palestinian cause. However, regardless of what their original topic was, the rallies had a remarkable ability to become declarations of support for Syria and Bashar. This was, according to one friend, “because there are two plain-clothes *mukhābarāt* present for every one actual demonstrator. When you find the crowd suddenly chanting for Bashar instead of for Palestine and several people are giving you piercing looks, it is best to switch your cries too.” Not that my friend really cared much either way. In fact, he was frequently puzzled by his foreign friend’s attempt to try and understand the actual meaning of what people were chanting about. He was perfectly content to stand around and chat idly with other ‘demonstrators.’ Finally, exasperated at being constantly questioned, he explained to me that “you don’t come to these things to protest or demonstrate. You come to meet girls (or boys).”

⁹⁹ Of course, it stands to reason that he also closed for more practical reasons. Given that the rest of Damascus would also *expect* shops to be closed, there would likely be no customers coming out to shop. Such a possibility widens the scope of the ‘as if’ politics, whereby the population, via its experience and understanding of the regime, creates the very outcome (i.e. the shops being closed for the rally) that the regime wishes to see (i.e. shops being closed) vis-à-vis their expectations (i.e. that shop owners will hold to the form of closing for the rally because it is ‘dangerous’ not to).

Demonstrations, it appeared, were some of the few socially acceptable situations where young men and women could come together to meet without a chaperone. It was, in fact, a disconnection par excellence.¹⁰⁰ These young men and women were physically positioned in an explicitly ‘political’ setting, and yet what they were ‘doing’ was as apolitical as it could be. They were using politics as a forum to do their personal relations. As I suggested, we cannot always take for granted the nature of what we are observing—just because a thing appears to be an official state occasion, does not mean it is (only that) for our informants (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2003:107).

Poster Plastering and Flag Waving

The pro-Syria campaign did not end at the official demonstration. Around the time of the rally, a number of posters and billboards began to appear throughout Damascus. One of the boards that I saw had several proud-looking young men and women¹⁰¹ saying “*kilnā maʿk, yā Bashar*”—“We are all with you, Bashar.” There was another one in Bab Touma square in the Old City that said “Proud to be a Syrian,” though only in English, which left me translating to some of my friends what it meant. There were posters too, photographs of President Bashar and some with Hafez al-Asad. My friend who had decided to close his shop and take the day off said that the day after the demonstration, a man had come to all of the nearby shops distributing such posters and Syrian flags free of charge. The owner had taken one of each, but had declined to hang them in his shop.

Wedeen (1999:75-6) notes the prevalence of such “cult” paraphernalia, including various icons of Hafez al-Asad, that tended to be displayed in all major institutions, many small businesses, and a large percentage of taxis. She describes a somewhat functional aspect for the hanging of such images, saying that, while not putting them up was not a punishable offence, having them visible might have

¹⁰⁰ This, in fact, rather similar to Wedeen’s (1999) notions of ‘as if’ interactions with the regime, whereby people are appearing to comply with the regime’s policies and actions but are also subverting them. However, whereas Wedeen sees such moments as political resistance, I would argue that this case is not so much one of resisting the regime, but of people co-opting ‘political’ moments for their own, non-political purposes.

¹⁰¹ Interestingly, none of the young women in these advertisements wore headscarves. Nor did the President’s wife, when she appeared in poster images.

encouraged police officers to look the other way in the case of minor violations (e.g. receiving a traffic ticket). However, one of the first things I noticed upon arriving in Damascus was the relative lack of such images compared to what I had envisaged based on her description. Only half, perhaps less, of the taxis had pictures of the president on their back windows, and an even smaller percentage of businesses did. One informant told me that Bashar had actually forbidden the hanging of such posters; biographer David Lesch (2005:3) makes a similar comment on the new president's distaste for cult iconography.

Aside from sheer amounts of it, there was a further distance between father and son in terms of iconography. The official "cult" of Hafez al-Asad described him as "the country's 'premier' pharmacist, teacher, doctor, and lawyer within a single election campaign" (Wedeen 2005:40). John Borneman (2004:18) describes how leaders of "totalizing" regimes often portray themselves as scientists, authors, etc. as a way to key in to the ideals of modernity as well giving themselves a sort of "transcendent" quality. In contrast to this, Hafez's son was sometimes referred to by the Syrian *population* (as opposed to official rhetoric) as "Dr. Bashar." This title was not in jest, but out of what felt like a genuine respect for his degree in ophthalmology.

Throughout much of the Middle Eastern area, being a learned man is a highly respected position, and is a quality that is traditionally expected in leaders. For instance, the *sayyids* in Yemen are people who trace blood descent from the Prophet Muhammed. Under the former Imamate in Lower Yemen, only a *sayyid* could become the Imam; however, it was not enough for him to merely be of the proper bloodline. He also had to be properly learned and pious (vom Bruck 2005), and usually "had to be a *mujtahid*, capable...of forming new law by extrapolation from scripture, a skill which only the learned can judge" (Dresch 1989:161). This learning usually referred to religious learning, rather than more "intellectual sciences" (Ibn Khaldoun 2005:371) that include forms of non-religious education and instruction. Learned men more generally are also afforded respect, for even rulers should have "respect for the religious law and for the scholars who are learned in it,...thinking highly of religious scholarship, belief in and veneration for men of religion and a

desire to receive their prayers, [and a] great respect for old men and teachers (Ibn Khaldoun 2005:112).

A doctor, though, does not fall under this rubric of *religiously* learned, nor does a pharmacist or lawyer. But in Syria, religious education is not the only variety that is respected. Four-year university degrees might not have meant much, but advanced degrees and certain professions do, especially if the person has studied or worked abroad. People were always impressed upon hearing that I was working on a PhD. And being a British-trained doctor earned Bashar a similar respect. At the same time there were also accounts that compared Bashar with his deceased brother Basil and declared that in some ways Basil would have been a better leader. Basil, it was explained to me, had done all of his military service and was much more militaristic in nature than his younger brother. The sword is just as important as the pen in matters of rule, though a leader who possesses both would be ideal (Ibn Khaldoun 2005:213, Messick 1993).

Returning to the posters, I do not wish to give the impression that all such presidential iconography had disappeared from the walls and buildings of Syria. It was still quite numerous with many examples depicting Hafez and with an occasional image of Basil.¹⁰² On the walls of the ancient Roman amphitheatre in Bosra, there was a larger-than-life size photograph of Bashar al-Asad (Figure 5). When walking into the main entrance of the University of Damascus, one was greeted by a similarly-sized visage of Hafez al-Asad. One of the primary things I noticed about the photographs were the poses that the men were in. Maria de Bella (2004:38) describes the way that Mussolini would select and edit photos of himself before allowing them to be distributed to the public, always choosing the ones that showed him with a strong jaw and an intense gaze, upholding the image of a ‘commander.’ The mass-distributed pictures of Bashar were similar in style, with Bashar, who somewhat lacks the strong chin of his father, gazing up and off into the distance, looking somber and dignified, as if deep in thought like a learned man would be. He

¹⁰² This resembles, if does not exactly match, the use of such pictures in Mussolini’s Italy. Di Bella (2004: 34) describes how images there frequently portrayed a ‘trinity’ of the ruler, his deceased father and his sons. In Syria, there was a trinity effect, including the dead father, but Wedeen (2005: 60) argues that only Hafez’s dead son could be included because he was no longer a potential threat. During my fieldwork, I saw many posters that included Hafez, Bashar and Bashar’s children, but never all three together. And photos with Bashar and his children always included his wife as well.

did, though, look somewhat more relaxed and open when pictured with his wife and children—or with the “children” of his country (see Figure 8 below).



Figure 5: Poster of Bashar al-Assad at Bosra

Hafez’s pictures (Figure 6), on the other hand, had taken on an almost grandfatherly aspect (cf. Schoeberlein 2004 for a description of a similar process with Lenin in the USSR). His head is tilted slightly down, as if he were speaking to a young child, and the gaze is focused straight out at the audience. A hint of a smile plays across his face, giving him a kind and benevolent perspective. Given the former “cult” rhetoric of Hafez as the country’s father (Wedeen 1999)¹⁰³ and that he has now died and passed on the country to his son, the assumption of a (loving) grandfather role would seem to be appropriate, though I never heard him described as such. Interestingly, I also never heard Bashar, either in official rhetoric or everyday descriptions, mentioned as being Syria’s ‘father,’ as if he were less qualified and

¹⁰³ Wedeen (1999:52), borrowing from Joseph’s (1994) (see below, Conclusion pg 236) ideas of “patriarchal connectivity” that the use of family rhetoric in the Syrian regime attempted to create a sense of familial connections between Asad and the population. As metaphorical ‘family members,’ then, regime and population would be extensions of each other and thus inherently bound together and implicated in the creation and maintenance of each other’s identities. However, as Joseph herself primarily applies this term to brother/sister (and not parent/child) relationships, I think Wedeen’s casual use of it might be somewhat too liberal without further ethnographic analysis along these lines.

perhaps too young to fill that position.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Shyroch and Howell (2001:247) note that in Jordan, when Abdullah II became the king in 1999 that he described himself as a ‘brother’ to the population, to continue the idea that his father had also been the country’s ‘father.’ But father-like or otherwise, these portraits were given little room in private spaces. Indeed, it was becoming more common to not see such photos even public in places such as restaurants; if they were present, they were often in unobtrusive, out-of-the-way areas where they were not readily visible.



Figure 6: Hanging of Hafez al-Asad on a building in Damascus

Slightly more complicated was the use of flags (*ʿalim*, pl. *aʿlām*). Unlike in America, where seeing an American flag hanging in front of someone’s private home is nothing out of the ordinary, in Damascus (initially) the only places I saw Syrian flags were in front of state ministries, unfailingly accompanied by Baʿth party flags. As I mentioned earlier, this led to informants feeling that there was no sense of Syrian nationality invested in the flag (as occurs in other countries), but rather an association with the thieves who worked in the ministries. The flag was a symbol of a regime that Syrians wished to distance themselves from. Yet, that was not always quite right. I had another friend who insisted that, while he hated the regime, he also

¹⁰⁴ Bashar was 34 years old when he became president of Syria. The Syrian constitution had previously stated that a person had to be 40 years old to become president, but it was rapidly changed to an age of 34 years directly after Hafez’s death.

believed that there could be a 'Syria' that was "bigger than (*akbar min*) the regime." He said that he wanted to buy and fly a Syrian flag, to show pride in being Syrian. He shook his head and said that he could not, because of the peer pressure. If he was seen flying a Syrian flag, people would assume that he was a part of or working for the regime. They would misunderstand his intentions and as a result, lose all trust in him. Likely they would no longer speak to him. The ability to ascribe meaning to the symbol of the flag has, then, been almost co-opted by the population, despite or perhaps *because* it is a form of symbolic capital controlled by the regime. Ordinary Syrians have transformed the artifact of the flag into a connection with the regime. By not hanging a flag, my friend was disconnecting from the regime, but at the same time was making connections between his peers and himself (cf. Jean-Klein 2001 and popular hegemony). He was connecting himself with his neighbors over the regime and his hopes for a Syria beyond the regime. The flag, through the everyday making of connections, was thus made predominantly into a symbol of the Asads and the Alawis.¹⁰⁵ The *absent flag*, on the other hand, became a symbol of the outsider status of the regime and the insider one of those not involved in it. Syrians, then, had substantial agency to (re)make symbolic capital, and more broadly, to define and order their world.

As a small postscript, when I first arrived in Syria, I was struck by how many more images of the Presidents Asad I saw than Syrian flags. However, by the time I left just over a year later, I was struck by the reverse. Indeed, on a return visit in June 2006, I was surprised to see a number of Syrian flags being hung outside private residences and small shops (Figure 7).¹⁰⁶ Pictures of the president on taxi windows had come down and been replaced with Syrian flags. Flags covered billboards, figuring local athletes in the foreground. Suddenly it seemed as if there was now an option for connecting not only to the regime, but to the country itself, whereas the two had been somewhat separated previously. In one case, the two were equated,¹⁰⁷ with Bashar standing proudly before a crowd of Syrian-flag waving people, and the

¹⁰⁵ In a somewhat similar fashion, Navaro-Yashin describes how a 'flag campaign' in Turkey used a state symbol, but was actually organized (and thus somewhat co-opted) by popular media companies (2002: 127-30).

¹⁰⁶ This may have had something to do with the sheer number of flags flying about the city more generally, in honor of the World Cup. Restaurants and streets were littered with foreign flags, but there was almost always a Syrian one nearby as well.

¹⁰⁷ An equation that had to be *made*, and might just as easily "collapse" after the fact.

slogan reading “God Defends Syria” (Figure 8). These newfound connections to a “bigger” Syria created a new, more positive space for people to connect to the regime. But as this is very much a recent and on-going movement, I was not able to observe what changes in relating might have been effected.



Figure 7: Syrian flag outside a shop in the Old City



Figure 8: Poster of Bashar in Damascus reading “God Defends Syria”

Al- Mukhābarāt —The Secret Police

One of the central, if invisible, figures in all of these interactions with regime propaganda was the agent of the secret police, waiting and watching, ready to report the slightest misconduct. Their job is to observe and make connections—analyzing what they have witnessed or heard and using that information to uncover potential threats to the regime. Memories of friends and family members disappearing in the night because of the secret police haunt Syrians’ imaginations. Wedeen (1999) describes how it was necessary for all political talk that might be considered a contest to the regime’s power or authority to be “hidden.” Hidden can mean, for her, either taking place out of sight and earshot of possible spies (i.e. in a private home or other safe place that the *mukhābarāt* theoretically cannot enter) or by using subversive forms of conversing that relied on the audience understanding what was *not* being said.¹⁰⁸ And indeed, these describe many of the ways that I experienced people engaging in Syrian politics, using allegorical jokes or talking in whispers. Before I left for Damascus, a Syrian friend warned me that no one would ‘talk politics’ with me there. I arrived somewhat worried by this, but found that just the opposite was true. Salamandra (2004:5) also remarks in her ethnography of Damascus that there is a “general assumption, shared by Syrians...that foreign researchers are spies” and that she was regularly accused of being CIA. Thus I was surprised at how readily my informants would enter into political conversations with me. It assuredly helped that this contact had introduced me to her family in Syria, so I was not utterly unknown. And her family was more familiar with social science as a form of study and could assure *their* friends that I was not a threat. Even so, other people that I met independently of these were equally comfortable speaking with me. When this same friend came to visit me part way through my study, I told her about my confusion at everyone being so willing to talk to me. She said that part of it might stem from the fact that, although I might be CIA, I was definitely *not* working for the Syrian

¹⁰⁸ Wedeen (1999:147) goes on to describe how Asad was considered to be ‘all-seeing,’ leading people to internalize their surveillance and always act as if they are being watched. What she does not necessarily account for is that this is not only true of the regime. Ordinary Syrians are also always watching each other and are always aware that they are being watched by family, friends and neighbors. Thus her Foucauldian-like reading of surveillance may not be so much a distinct political phenomenon created by the Asad regime, but perhaps is a broader socio-cultural trend (see Chapter 7).

mukhābarāt. Syrians might not like foreign spies, she said, but they were far more likely to be afraid of their own.

And people were certainly wary of them. My informants told me that anybody could be a member of the secret police: waiters, the not-so-subtle men wearing all black and carrying pistols on the street, even taxi drivers. In fact, when I was taking a course on the local dialect, my class came across the phrase ‘*ma lau ta^cmeh*’ (‘tasteless’ or inappropriate). When trying to give an example of something that would fit this description, the Syrian instructor said, “Like talking politics in a taxi, because you can never be certain your driver is not *mukhābarāt*.” Another informant assured me that at least 19% of the population belonged to or worked for the secret police: “You can’t trust anyone outside of your immediate family, even your extended family could be dangerous.”¹⁰⁹ People were therefore very aware of their surroundings. They would not necessarily limit what they were saying, they just made very sure they were not being overheard. For example, one afternoon in a relaxed, Old city café, a friend and I were discussing politics, and he wanted to bring up the topic of the Syrian regime. Before doing so, we changed where we were sitting (we knew the owner and so had free reign to move as we pleased) to an area that was set back from the rest of the café and gave a good line of sight to observe anyone that might be listening in. Another day, a girlfriend and I sat in a café in a fashionable district of town talking about the secret police. Though she brought up the subject herself, she still spoke in English, kept her voice to a whisper, and constantly looked over her shoulder to make sure that no one was listening. “Even the walls have ears,” she told me.

Walls, telephones and even email apparently had ears. Many Syrians believed that the *mukhābarāt*’s strength was enough to allow them to monitor all manner of communication, including every e-mail that was sent and every phone call that was made. I imagined this degree of monitoring must have required a massive amount of man-power and time, but my informants assured me that the regime had it. In fact, a Kurdish informant told me that the regime was so intent on maintaining its surveillance that speaking in Kurdish on the phone was actually illegal. He said there was some official reason given, but the real reason was because the people listening

¹⁰⁹ This family aspect of talk about the secret police is something I shall return to in Chapter 6.

in to the conversations could not understand the language and so could not effectively keep tabs on what was being said.¹¹⁰ Even one's home one was not entirely safe. I attended a party one evening where the conversation turned political and heavily critical. Early into the conversation, the owner of the apartment crossed to the windows and closed them, despite the warmth of the evening. Several others nodded approvingly. He looked at me, said "*yimkin mu dhurūri, bas...*" ("maybe it's not necessary, but...") and shrugged.

But at the same time, I had other informants tell me that the power of the *mukhābarāt* had been much reduced since Bashar al-Asad came into power. There was no distinctive class or education element to this (at least amongst the various middle classes), for some wealthier, well-educated people would be dismissive about the current power of the secret police, while others were still very nervous, and the same spread held true for the lower middle classes as well. I would frequently see people making jokes about the secret police, including one employee at a popular café mocking a group of them who had come in the previous evening. He mimicked their behavior by alternating strutting around—all puffed up with self-importance—with acting like an obtuse ape. His audience laughed and slapped their knees appropriately, appreciating the joke. However, he had been a properly deferential waiter the night before when they had actually been present. But stories and fears aside, how present *were* the secret police in Syrians' lives?

The first-person experiences that my informants had with the secret police and recounted to me often seemed to be pretty harmless. And despite my friends' assurances that the *mukhābarāt* were far more interested in Syrians than in foreigners, several of the narrations involved or revolved around a foreigner. For instance most foreigners, especially those living in rented rooms in the Old City, could expect to receive a visit from the secret police within the first month or so of their residence. An agent would come by, usually without any warning, and take down a variety of information about the foreigner (all of which was already recorded at the Immigration Ministry). It was a small nuisance for the foreigner, but provided a space for interaction between the agent and ordinary Syrians hosting the foreigner

¹¹⁰ Such a Kurdish-specific surveillance was said to be particularly central to the *mukhābarāt*, given the amount of unrest and the occasional tendency towards uprising amongst the Kurdish population, especially in the Northern areas of Syria.

(i.e. the owner of the house). In the first house I was living in, the father of the family was less than pleased at the intrusion of the secret police into his house. The agent came up to my room and I met him in the hall. A younger female cousin of the household stood by, ready to translate. The father, who was not a tall man, was also present, standing over the shoulder of the agent, keenly watching his every move. The agent clearly felt the antagonism and was somewhat put off by it, trying to get through all the information as hurriedly as possible. When he asked for my date of birth, I told him—at this point my birthday was only several weeks away. Upon hearing that, the father seized his opportunity to quietly harass the agent by breaking into a happy birthday song, singing as loudly as he could, clapping vigorously, and dancing wildly across the area in which the man was trying to conduct his ‘serious’ work. I giggled delightedly, but the agent pursed his lips and frowned, obviously annoyed but unable to say anything to disrupt the perfectly legitimate display of excitement over a birthday. It was only later that I made the connection between this moment and some of the clever ‘playing’ that Gilsenan (1996) describes, whereby one individual uses his wit to invert the obvious social hierarchy and is most successful when the other is left unable to retort. The agent, despite holding a frighteningly superior position in the official ranks was at a loss to regain control of the situation. And by his general hostility and his joking actions, the father was indicating a sharp demarcation (disconnection) between the two individuals. However, there was also a connection between the two men, in that, for the play to be effective, the two had to share a common code of decency and appropriateness. That the point of the song was initially lost on me, but was *not* lost on the *mukhābarāt* agent, indicates that *I* was the one who was outside their shared code of social conduct. And yet I (unintentionally) moved myself ‘inside’ by joining in the fun and laughing.

In a somewhat less humorous situation, I also managed to get another Syrian caught up in an interaction with the secret police. I had a Syrian friend whose husband, through a line of *waṣṭa* (‘connections’), helped me to get a visa extension (see Chapter 6). One evening while sitting around at their house, the husband told me that a friend of his had been told by another friend who worked in the Passport and Immigration Ministry that the word on the street was that I knew someone in Syria

who had been in Israel. My first thought was to be impressed by the chains of rumor that had managed to find their way from some informant on the street through several Ministries and workplaces to finally find me. My second thought was confusion, because the rumor was not true. My third thought was worry, as to who would have said such a thing and what the consequences might be. My friend's husband told me not to worry, but just to be careful. In retrospect, I realized that the warning had only partially been intended for me. It had also been somewhat directed at my friend's husband, quietly warning him to not be caught making inappropriate connections. By warning me in a friendly way, he was ensuring that I would not accidentally get him, or anyone else in the chain of *wasta* in trouble. Activating the wrong connections could be problematic for all involved.

It was not only in the context of foreigners that Syrians encountered the secret police. Those interactions involving only Syrians carried a great deal more weight, for the dangerous party was not a foreigner who was bound to leave the country sooner or later (thus taking most of her potential for trouble-making with her), but was the Syrian himself. For instance, I had a friend who used to work as a clerk in a foreign embassy in Damascus. Part of his job entailed handling money in both Syrian and the relevant foreign currency. He told me that, one day, the secret police called him in for questioning and accused him of illegally exchanging currencies on the black market. My friend denied the claim and said there was no proof of that; the only money changing he had done had been under the auspices of embassy functions. They relaxed, but demanded that he help his country by spying on the embassy workings for them. He said he did not have access to anything even remotely classified and would be of no help, but they said that even the colors of the guards' shoes could be useful. He was confused, but they told him that they were the professionals and to let them decide what would or would not be of use to them in the intelligence agency.

He said that the *mukhābarāt* usually question all such employees at regular intervals, but most employees wanted nothing to do with them, as he had ultimately refused to help them. But at the same time, he said with a sigh, "there are a lot of people who, like monkeys, grab whatever bananas they see and hand them over to the police for some extra money." He, in his narrated version, had staunchly refused

to submit to the tactics of the *mukhābarāt*, creating a disconnection between him and the regime vis-à-vis their police. They had enough power over him to physically compel him to come to the meeting, but did not have any legitimate way to coerce him into working for them. But he acknowledged that there were people who, like foolish monkeys, agreed to help out of the desire to make some extra money. Through his scorn of their actions, he distanced himself as much from his fellow employees as from the actual regime agents. The greedy employees were narrated as being connected to the regime by choice, and the narrator externalized all of them.

People's wariness and dislike of the *mukhābarāt* served to set the regime as outsiders, while connecting and uniting non-regime Syrians through their combined disconnections and (returning to flags) their ability to collectively alter the meanings of regime symbols. The secret police also gave the population moments to further challenge and test the regime. Syrians could mock regime figures (if behind their backs) or openly interfere with them by temporarily upending who had control of a situation. And if they found themselves having to cooperate in minimal fashions, they could choose to do it grudgingly. But what we begin to get a hint of here, which I shall explore in Chapter 6, is that sometimes non-regime people can be implicated in regime activities (i.e. the "monkeys"). Once again, we see the ins and outs shifting, with no connections (or disconnections) as permanent or clearly delineated as they might seem.

Houses

Private homes, as I noted above, were one of the few places where people felt they could safely discuss politics—as long as the windows were closed. The regime could not intrude upon the sanctity of the home without very good reason. "‘Intellectual life under dictatorship’...not only exists, but may even thrive, especially in the privacy of one's own home" (Wedeen 1999:148, citation removed). And in Yemen, the home is not only private,¹¹¹ it is also autonomous: "the house is the first level of government, closed to the shaikh's policing, save in the case of murder...[which] invites outside authority inside. Otherwise, to enter the walls of a house the sheikh must be invited"

¹¹¹ Cf. Marcus (1986) for an examination of the ideal versus practical experience of privacy.

(Mundy 1995:56). And yet, despite that theoretical autonomy, we saw how the secret police in Syria expected to be allowed into citizens' homes for registration purposes without making an appointment. They wielded their authority by appearing when they so desired and gaining entry without protest; the father was able to use indirect means to assert his authority in his home, but did not have the direct authority (or maybe the desire) to make them leave. Perhaps we could label this an 'extreme case,' but it was very common for anyone who welcomed foreigners into their homes. In this section, I intend to show how the 'home,' rather than being a place of protection and isolation, can very much be a space of interaction and sometimes contestation between the regime and its population. Even in moments where such tension is not explicit, homes and aspects of them can still feature heavily in the processes of politics and identity. The house, so central to studies of Middle Eastern and Arab culture and society (Bourdieu 1977, Layne 1994) is not so sacred or private as we might like to assume (c.f. vom Bruck 1997, Jean-Klein 2003), nor is the neighborhood surrounding it.

The Price of Living in Syria

About the House

The classic image of an 'Arab' house (if it is not a tent), is of an inward-facing structure, with rooms enough for multiple generations and extended family members. The house is always shifting, an active process of realizing potentials¹¹² (Bourdieu 1977, Layne 1994, Mitchell 1988). It contains a *mejlis* or guest room—slowly being formalized into a *salon*—that is somewhat offset from the rest of the house, where it can be realized as a gender-defined space if and when necessary (Gilsenan 1982). As mentioned in the introduction, there are such houses in Damascus, though they are mostly limited to the Old City; some are palatial in nature, remainders of Ottoman-era wealth. Most are less glamorous, however. The original inhabitants of these homes have, for the most part, long since left; having money, they moved to the new and fashionable apartment complexes of the New City. Many of the old houses' new inhabitants are recent immigrants to Damascus, who moved into the available space.

¹¹² A process that sounds not too far removed from my image of "connecting the dots."

Some are now also being bought by wealthy owners wishing to (re)generate a sense of the Old Damascus ‘majesty’ (c.f. Salamandra 2004 for this process in Damascus, vom Bruck 2005 in Yemen).

I knew only two Syrians who lived in these old style homes. Despite the room for housing multiple families, one lived alone with his mother. His family was ‘old money,’ and had owned the house for hundreds of years. They had once (according to him) owned most of what is now the bustling *Sūq Hamidīya*. His home was a third of the size it once was, having been split between three brothers two generations ago, but still has sixteen rooms and a very large and tastefully decorated courtyard. They had stayed because the house was a sign of their wealth and onetime political influence and prestige—a prestige that means little now, at least in *official* circles. The other person I knew lived in a much smaller home that was rickety and covered in hasty repair-work. It too had a courtyard, but the fountain was never turned on except when one of the sisters-in-law was cleaning it. My friend was one of eight children, seven of whom were male. His family origins were in what is now Lebanon, and though the family had been in the house for over 50 years, they were not its original occupants. His parents were still alive and living in the house, along with the oldest two brothers, their wives, and children. My friend said that he and at least two more of his brothers would likely continue to live there as well. They remained in this house, not necessarily from choice, but because of economic necessity—they were not living in poverty, but nor were they middle class. They had no options to go elsewhere.

Most of my friends, however, lived in the New City, in apartments that had a very different feel to them compared to more ‘traditional’ homes. Smaller in size, there was generally only one sitting area (replete with television), which was not usually separate-able from any other part of the house. Sometimes the apartments had a small courtyard if the occupant was lucky enough to be on the ground floor, but most people had to make do without. These homes usually only housed a single family of parents and unmarried children and would be passed down to whichever child seemed most in need of it. Outlying suburbs were usually composed of apartment buildings like these, though there were also massive, multi-family ‘*villāt*’ (sing. *villa*) being built in these communities. But these were very expensive, and the

vast majority of Syrians could not afford such houses; only the odd foreigner, the elite, or the nouveaux riches could.

Immigrants and Emigrants

These massive costs reflected a growing housing problem in Damascus due partially, as I suggested to in previous chapters, to the recent influx of foreigners and Syrian villagers into the city. The immediate economic impact on Syrians was that this population inflation dramatically drove up the cost of housing. One friend had bought a new home a couple of years ago in a suburb of the city and said that the same apartment would now cost at least twice as much. Another informant said that her father had previously owned a house allotted to him by the military while he was employed in the army. He sold the house some years ago, to make a little extra money, but my friend grumbled saying that he would have been better served had he waited and sold it now, because it would probably make three times as much as it had then. While these inflated costs have had a number of economic impacts, it was perhaps most damaging for those who do not have houses of their own—the youth of today.

One evening, a friend (who was in her early 20's) and I were walking around her development—an upper middle class suburb called Meshrou Dummar. She had been talking about her boyfriend and thoughts for marriage, when we passed some new apartment buildings. I asked her how much they cost.

Oh, about 5,000,000 (\$100,000 US) lira for one like that—it's probably like ours [two bedrooms, a kitchen, a small eating area, and a living room]. But that's the problem...how is someone supposed to buy a house like that when he first gets a job? We don't have banks and loans like you do and not everyone's parents have the money to buy them a place these days. Like Rabi^ca [her boyfriend], for example. We really want to get married after we finish university, but how can we? Where will we live? He won't be able to afford a house for years and by then, I'll be too old. ["So what will you do?" I asked.] Well, he'll probably go get a job in the Gulf somewhere. He's very smart and can maybe get a good job. He can go for five years and maybe I'll go join him there in three years, even though I don't want to live in Saudi Arabia. But maybe he can make money faster there, and then we can come back and buy a house and have a family.

The high cost of housing, then, had many implications, especially for young couples who wish to get married and have children. While it is and historically has been very common for younger girls to marry older men who have had time to develop some financial security, there is a rising trend for dating amongst the Syrian youth. Young couples fall in love and want to marry, sometimes with their parents' permission¹¹³ and sometimes with their disapproval, but because there was no option for mortgages, they did not have the opportunity to do so unless their parents were quite wealthy. They would simply have no place to live.

Young Syrian men, aware that the job options within Syria were limited and did not pay as well as they needed, considered their only option to be to head abroad for work. Usually this involved a young man having or finding connections in a Gulf country, and living there for several years in the hopes of making more money than he could in Syria. I heard a number of stories related to this work emigration, some very positive—one informant's uncle stayed away for thirty years because the pay was so good. But not always—this same informant's brother returned within months because his employer treated him as something less than human, a blow to his pride that he would not accept. And while getting to the Gulf was usually the most accessible option, many young Syrian men also dreamed of getting to Europe or America. This usually, though not always, required the young man's family to have some money to begin with, enough to get him there. His other option was to be lucky enough to find a foreign woman to marry him and take him home. And while young men dreamed of getting out to make a fortune, their families feared and hated it. "We'll never see him again. He'll get to America and he won't ever come back. That's how it always happens." It was a refrain I heard more than once in reference to emigration. And it was almost always young men involved; there was no equivalent pressure on young women.

What we see, then, is that immigration, foreign or Syrian, into the cities, has contributed to the *emigration* of Syrian and Damascene youth out of the country. This loss of the younger generations reflects a perceived flaw in Syria, in that the country does not have the wherewithal to provide its population with work that will

¹¹³ In my experience, marriages of love were generally more common among the Christian population, but there was the sense that they were becoming more popular among the Muslims of my generation, especially among the middle and upper classes.

be sufficient enough to supply the basic necessities of life (such as a place to live). The unspoken criticism here was that the regime's inability to provide for its people was resulting in a 'brain drain' and the loss of sons to the rest of the world.

Running from Home (and the Military)

If the housing problem were not enough, the regime then adds a further impetus for its young men to flee—the mandatory military service that all men have to fulfill. Service lasts for two and a half to three years, depending on how much time was spent in summer training camps during school years. A man can postpone his service by entering into university, but this is only a temporary reprieve.¹¹⁴ The 'recruitment' is not so rough as Michael Taussig (1992:23) describes for Columbia, where young men are constantly required to carry proof of their completed service or risk being whisked off in the night, but Syrian men were usually found and brought in. I knew many young men doing their best to dodge the service by various methods, and those I knew who had done their time had nothing good to say about it. One recalled for me time spent lying face down naked in the snow as a drill and having mice nibble on his toes as he slept. Another told how he witnessed his commander taking more than his fair share of the bread, depriving the soldiers of their full rations for no other reason than to feed his pet cow. I was told that one of the worst parts was being subjected to no end of humiliation (*zall*) by the officers who, by all accounts are socially, culturally, and mentally inferior.

Not surprisingly, a good number of the officers are Alawi, providing further fuel to narratively (re)create the divide between Alawis and all others. There are not many legal ways for a man to get out of his military service—being an only son is one way to get exempted. For those who do not have that option, another route is to leave the country. While it has been possible to pay one's way out of service (*badal*) since before 1964, the prices have increased drastically since then (Batatu 1981:341-

¹¹⁴ The temporariness of the delay can vary though, depending on how long a student manages to stay on the university books. I knew one student who managed to draw a four-year degree out to seven years, just in an attempt to avoid his military service.

343).¹¹⁵ I was told that there was a relatively recent law that states that if a man spends five years working in the Gulf and pays \$5,000 US to the Syrian government, he will be exempt from his service. If he goes anywhere else outside of the Gulf, the same general rule applies, except that he must stay out for ten years and pay \$10,000 US. This law also provides a way for those who formerly emigrated without doing their service to be able to return without risk of being thrown in jail upon entering the airport. Though, it goes without saying that if a boy's family has enough money and knows the right people army service will not be a necessity. I, in fact, knew of two men in such a situation, both of whom were somewhat hesitant to tell me, lowering their voices and grinning awkwardly. One's father was a very wealthy businessmen who knew the right people, and the other had an uncle who was a very high-ranking official in the *mukhābarāt*. Less fortunate men were aware of these inconsistencies and resented them.

There is a theme in the above complications of living in Syria that ties back to the regime. Due to a lack of financial support for its population and an uneven requirement to endure the humiliation of military service, young men find themselves forced to leave the country, if they can afford to do so. Families are split and it is always uncertain if the sons will be seen again. And if this were not insult enough, many of the new suburbs were originally designed for upper echelon members of the military (read: Alawis). They were given new houses and villas that are well beyond the official salaries they were meant to be making. Corruption was narrated to as rampant and at the expense of the general population.

Further, as these former peasants flocked to the city, they served only to ruin what had once been a fair town.¹¹⁶ As one older man whose family had been living in Damascus for several generations (though ironically was originally from what is now Saudi Arabia) said (in English):

¹¹⁵ Members of non-Muslim millets were also given the opportunity to avoid military conscription when it was first instituted by the Ottomans in the mid-late 19th century by paying a tax (Douwes 1999), though this was not adopted after independence.

¹¹⁶ Salamandra (2004:13) also notes this tendency among Damascenes to be highly resentful and dismissive of the influx of Syrian 'foreigners' (*ghurbatliyyeh*) into Damascus. She suggests that much of the 'Old Damascus' identity negotiation is a way for the urbanites to deal with the demographic shifts and the concomitant reversal of power from the urban elite to a rural one.

At least immigrants from other cities bring their own customs and add to the life and culture of Damascus, but the villagers bring nothing beneficial with them. They just take everything and make it their own and in the process destroy the idea of what Damascus was. I mean, look at those vegetable markets outside of the mosques on Fridays. You never used to see that in the city, but it was really common out in the villages. And now they've brought that tradition here with them and they block the sidewalks and make everything ugly when we're trying to go pray. I used to remember walking around the city with my father, going to restaurants, and everyone knew everyone. Everyone knew that this was the Qabbani table and that was the al-Abyad table and so on. Now everything is cold and impersonal because of all these strangers, these backwards village folk. And they have no...power. Not power like political (*siyāsi*) power, but real power—power like the old Damascene families had, power of education and background, proper upbringing and prestige.¹¹⁷

The 'outsider' Alawis were physically (if not socially or ideologically) moving 'inside' the Damascene sphere and ruining it, abusing their ill-founded and sub-par 'political' power and giving nothing back. In these moments of living and housing, the Alawis, and thus the regime itself, could not be (made) more 'different' than Us.

Inside the House

But the regime's presence in living one's daily life was not restricted to house availability, the military or emigration. Sometimes it became even more personal and invasive; a decidedly one-sided ability of the regime to penetrate those more 'private' spaces of life. And one-sided it was President Bashar lives in a very nice district of the New City called Maalki, by far one of the wealthiest sections of town (see Introduction, also Salamandra 2004 for in-depth descriptions of location and elitism in Damascus). The house is not particularly separated from the rest of the residential area and lies on one of the major routes from the city to the popular outing spot of Mount Qasiyoun. What separates it from the rest of the surrounding area is the fact that the entire street is covered by security guards dressed in black suits, sunglasses, obvious earpieces and most likely hidden firearms (rather than the very obvious sub-

¹¹⁷ This statement somewhat challenges Salamandra's (2004:21) observation that "a shift has occurred in the understanding of what is considered elite," moving from an emphasis on education, access to the West, political and economic power, and manners/class to being centered on a culture of consumption.

machine guns that various other street military guards will carry). This equivalent of the Secret Service patrols the street at all times.

Most of the time, cars wishing to drive up to the mountain or beyond have no problem...the guards do not even give them a second glance. However, one night while driving with some friends to the mountain, one of the guards stopped us at the entrance to the street and told us to turn around and find another route. It was the first time any of us had experienced such a thing. The driver grumbled and said it was likely because of his car, an old Skoda hatch-back. He said that if we had been driving in a nice car, the guards surely would have let us pass, regardless of the hour. He then surprised me by saying that it was just the guards, that "if Dr. Bashar knew about this, he would fix the problem immediately."¹¹⁸ The physicality of the situation speaks to an activated power, a physical imposition on movement, regardless of the potential kindness and understanding of the leader himself. The guards, as representatives of the regime, had the ability to restrict us from entering the space of the regime (as embodied by the President and his house). This is in decided contrast to the secret policemen in the preceding section, who had the full right and ability to enter into general Syrians' houses. However, at the same time, my friend's take on the situation returns us to the uncertainty and duplexity in the ways that the regime was presented, with the president himself often being a figure of greater confidence than his subordinates. Though the guards would prevent us from moving into the president's physical 'inside,' he himself would allow it 'if he only knew'¹¹⁹ (indeed, even the house owners ultimately 'chose' to allow the police into their homes, if perhaps under slightly more duress). Bashar was seen to better epitomize the hospitable host,¹²⁰ thus returning us to a sense of morality, where by quietly

¹¹⁸ Wedeen (1999:99-100) suggests that political cartoons would often hide critique in forms that depicted the president as being the solution to all society's ills, but is unaware of what is wrong around him and therefore does not act. She suggests that they are farcical, allowing criticisms to slip by the censors. That may be true in some cases, but does not necessarily account for the fact that ordinary people themselves will sincerely espouse such a belief as well.

¹¹⁹ I find myself returned here to Strathern's critiques of context and the 'if only one knew' philosophy towards it.

¹²⁰ A number of informants stressed the importance of hospitality as one of the 'best' (morally) qualities of the 'Arab' peoples. While I was in Jordan, I stayed with the family of a friend in Amman. I only stayed with them two days, and they made me promise to return, because they had not had the time to properly guest me with the traditional three days of eating and luxury. Even the bitterest enemies, they told me with pride, would host each other with no tensions or questions asked for three days.

associating hospitality and being welcoming of guests or passers-by, my informant was activating a line in the process of morality. And Bashar, as a now-made-morally sound figure becomes (like) an insider and is more connected to ordinary Syrians than he is to the faceless, nameless members of the rest of the regime.

Such a statement, however, did not necessarily only point to the virtue of Bashar, for hospitality and houses are complex processes throughout much of the Middle East. Meneley (1996), for instance, describes how central the everyday patterns of women's visiting and hosting are for ideas of familial honor and status in the Yemeni town of Zabid. Rather than just being a sign of female solidarity, she shows how regular visits (or the lack thereof) and the etiquette within them are highly competitive as well. These visits both reflect and reinforce social hierarchies within the towns, and reciprocity in them is key to determining who is equal to whom. The receiving of visitors in one's home (or possibly allowing them to pass on your street) shows how honorable or well-thought of a certain family is—the more people attending, the better, and it is perfectly acceptable to invite women of lesser status to one's home and to give them gifts they cannot repay. However, to not accept an invitation or to not visit another family's home spontaneously is to make a statement and create a hierarchical division between the two families, as a woman will not visit the home of someone she considers to immoral (i.e. prostitutes) or of an inferior status. Thus, to speak of someone's hospitality in receiving another person (or, in the Syrian case, allowing them into one's extended space) is not only to acknowledge them as honorable, but simultaneously to acknowledge a hierarchical division between potential 'host' and 'guest,' especially when the host (i.e. Bashar) would not be likely to return any possible invitations made by the guest (my informant).

Shyrock and Howell (2001:263) note similar themes surrounding hospitality and generosity (*karam*) in Jordan: "*karam* is intimately related to power, and this relationship tends to be indirect and unstable, with power corrupting hospitality or hospitality depleting the power it serves." In their article, they explicitly relate ideas of generosity and hospitality to state processes, arguing that the concepts of the 'house' and house politics present a way of thinking about state politics in the Middle East. "Political power [becomes] a quality that can be measured most accurately in

the formal, highly stylized exchanges that occur between guest and host, giver and taker, protector and protected, patron and client” (Shyrock and Howell 2001:254). They too discuss the competitive aspect of hospitality and the unequal relations it can reflect and engender if one side is unable to reciprocate (or the other is unwilling to reduce their station by accepting such an invitation). Thus, to relate politics to the house and family (as shall be continued in the following chapters) is perhaps not such a wild analogy. By the traditions of host and guest, Bashar al-Asad is created through my informant’s statement as someone who (despite his underlings) is both a moral and honorable individual, but one who is also in a hierarchically superior position. And expanding on this, we could even consider the regime *as* a house(hold), with certain rights and responsibilities and fully embroiled in the regular, competitive politicking of house life. In this sense, then, we begin to encounter the idea that the regime may not be so much ‘above’ the rest of the population, but rather is incorporated through such statements as merely one of many ‘houses’ that people interact with, a theme I shall return to in the following chapters.

Keeping with uncertainty, Bashar’s moral status, even on a personal level, was no stable thing either. Our destination that, night, Mount Qasiyoun, is known for its expensive cafes and its beautiful views overlooking Damascus, by day or night. There is one main strip that contains all these cafes, a number of smaller coffee stands, some benches and a walkway in places. To get up there requires driving up a number of winding roads that trace up the back of the mountain. Due to these secluded spots, Qasiyoun has also earned a reputation for being somewhat of a ‘lover’s lane;’ at night, young couples would drive up the mountain and park somewhere out of sight to do the things that young lovers do, illegal though it might be. There is joke, however, about the president and Qasiyoun:

The president and his wife decided to get away from all the pressure and so took a little jaunt up to Mount Qasiyoun to do what people do up there. However, after a while, along came some police and knocked on the car window, intending to give the offending couple the requisite fine. The officer saw that it was the president, but said “Sorry, Mr. President, but laws are laws.” So the president nodded his head, chagrined, and went with the officer. They went down to the station and the officer wrote up two tickets, 500 lira for the president and 1000 for his wife. The president said “Why is it 500 for me but 1000 for my wife?” The officer replied “This is the first time for you Mr. President, but it is the fourth time for your wife.”

Given the centrality of women in the process of ‘doing’ morality and ‘honor’ (*sharaf*) (a subject I shall return to in more detail in Chapter 7), that the president’s wife had been up on the mountain fooling around three times with what was obviously another man, had strong implications for Bashar’s personal honor and morality. Perhaps he was not so morally perfect as the ‘if he only knew’ rhetoric painted him. Or perhaps he was both. Or maybe it shows that he too was vulnerable in the same ways that ordinary people were, making him just like them.

Coming back to the idea of who can enter whose space, I turn to a final example, an instance where the regime not only entered into a house, but *became* what was this supposedly private sanctum. Not long after I met my friend Abeer, she was telling me about how her daughter’s husband was in opera school and so always off in Italy for long stretches of time. Though their flat was not enormous, she and her husband had decided to separate one area from the rest and convert it into a small studio for their daughter, her husband, and their coming child so that her daughter would not have to live in a house on her own. But Abeer had not been able to make it as nice as she would have liked.

Really, I can’t make any big changes to my house. Why? Because the *regime* owns my house, not me. My husband and I bought this house when we got married, but then Hafez al-Asad made a decree that declared my house and most of the block now belonged to the regime. We didn’t get any choice or say in the matter, and no warning. The whole block was supposedly given to the Ministry of Education, and they said they were going to change the it into a school. But I think there was a hidden agenda somewhere, because the population of this neighborhood hasn’t grown at all to need a new school. And anyhow, there is already another school right around the corner that has been closed for a very long time—if they *really* wanted a school, they could have just used that. What I think happened was there was an official in the bureaucracy—they were *known* criminals who got Asad to sign the decree without saying why and wanted to use it for some sneaky thing or another. We tried to petition the courts to get it lifted, but it they had no power in the matter *because* it was a decree. Only another presidential decree could change it, and while Bashar stopped the talk of some mystery ‘school,’ he has done *nothing* to give the people of this block back their homes. [There was a look of disappointment on her face at this point, somewhat sad and confused as to why Bashar had not fixed the situation.] Some of the people in the block caved in and left, but no one in our building—we’re standing strong. Our only real hope is that there is a clause in the law (somewhere) that says that if a presidential decree has not been carried out within 20 years of its

pronouncement, then it becomes null and void. [“How long has it been?” I asked.] They took our house 19 years ago.

And Abeer is no poverty-line citizen; she is from an old, well-known and well-respected Christian family, educated, polished, and a major figure in the Christian Orthodox community. But the regime had no respect for her wealth or prestige and took away her very house. And by the time I had left, they had rolled into their 20th year and nothing had been achieved in returning possession of the apartment. She was angry and bitter, but somewhat resigned as well. She continued to live in her house as if it were her own, while knowing better. She understood that she had no power to change her situation (she had tried). This denial combined her lived acceptance seems to hearken back to Žižek’s (1997) Cynicism (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002), where people are aware that a thing is constructed or unreal, but continue to live as if it were ‘real.’ Abeer certainly was cynical about the situation.

But her situation and her narrating of it speak to a great deal of relation-doing, connection-making, beginning with the potential of a (dis)connection between Abeer and the regime. There were elements of conspiracy in her narration, indicating some hidden motive at work that was primarily for someone else’s benefit. The thieves rhetoric was reiterated, as well. Using these tropes, she distanced herself from the regime. In other words, she disconnected the regime from the world of her ‘inside.’ However, at the same time, the situation was such that, whatever she did, there was an active connection between her and the regime, in that the latter actually owned the space in which she moved everyday. Whether she liked it or not, she and the regime were connected (a connection she herself recreated by narrating it). And again we see a process of challenging taking place, where Abeer was challenging the moral legitimacy of the regime by narrating another instance of its thievery. It was taking something of value and giving nothing in return, thereby failing to adhere to the proper moral aesthetic. We see another example of a duplexity, where they were both connected and not. And in the end, all supposed or imagined ‘barriers’ between the ‘public’ and ‘private,’ between the ‘inside and the ‘outside’ were lost in a sea of multiple relations.

Resisting the Regime?

Throughout the course of the past several chapters, I have been seeming to fit into a rather predictable pattern whereby, except in situations where Syria was set against an international backdrop, the ‘people’ of Syria have been set in contrast to the Syrian regime. The narrations I have presented have, for the most part, illuminated a ‘natural’ and obvious divide between the rulers and the ruled. To be sure, there were moments of ambiguity, or at least of competing narrations that portrayed the ‘regime’ in a positive light. I am well aware of the simplification and have used it intentionally, following the styles and tropes of many ethnographies and studies of the state. There are two problems with such an analytical stance, which I shall attempt to break down in the following two chapters. The first is that in doing so I am pretty well managing to reify the very existence that I would like to question—i.e. that of the regime. In the first section, I examined people’s use of a variety of identity discourses to negotiate relations on a variety of scales. That people were able to think with several sets of identities, such as ethnic or religious ones, that extend beyond the boundaries of a country is nothing new. However, when I turned my attention to politicking and connection-making *within* the Syrian borders, the use of identity, morality and other such concepts were premised on, and thus (re)created a substantial disconnection between the people and the regime. Partially this is a reflection of the gap that my informants themselves were creating, but I am no less responsible for making the divisiveness explicit than they were (because I am making my own connections and urging you to make similar ones). I chose to take this tack because to ignore it or try to dress it up as something else would miss the very real point that Syrians *did* feel themselves to be distanced from their leaders. They framed it in terms of identity politics (they are Alawi and we are not), corruption, criminality, and the like and expressed it via narrations and humor. If they sometimes were willing to praise their regime or figures within it, that perhaps reflects the idea that people are not *all* bad, that everyone has positive qualities. But nice as Dr. Bashar might be, he was still not one an ‘insider.’ But in the process of disconnecting from the regime in such ways, Syrians were also assuming and thus creating a insider group, making connections between all those who felt the regime to be distant from them.

Secondly, throughout these last two chapters in particular, I have focused on the ways the some of these narrations served to ‘challenge’ the regime, testing its moral, ideological and effective power. Perhaps the obvious suggestion here is that this challenging was a form of popular, discursive ‘resistance.’ On the surface, I appear to be re-presenting a nearly classic case of a disenfranchised and powerless population attempting to resist an all-powerful and oppressive ruling class. However, appearances notwithstanding, I am instead choosing to follow a more recent trend to examine the other sides of resistance. Wedeen (1999), for example, looks at how, in doing what appears to be resistance, Syrians were often engaging in and thus reproducing the very official dialogue that they were resisting against. She suggests that Syrian resistance lay in their transgressions, their turning of the regime’s discourse on its head, but nevertheless still operating within and limited to that framework. Navaro-Yashin (2002: 129) decides to move away from studies of resistance altogether and “examine [the] practice of active support for the state on the part of the people... studying public *participation* in and *perpetuation* of, rather than resistance to, state power.”

I have avoided, and will continue to avoid, the use of the term all together. To use resistance as an exegetical tool is the surest way to reify the kind of regime/people divide I am ultimately hoping to avoid. It is a gloss that fails to account the degree of political duplexity I witnessed in Syria. Thus, to counter the trend that has appeared to characterize my work so far, in Chapter 6, I will explore the ways in which ‘the people’ distinguish themselves from themselves, thus now challenging the ‘We’ that began to seem so apparent in the last several chapters. I will also look at the ways in which the regime itself, in these moments, becomes not so much a thing-above-and-beyond, but just another one of a whole set of Others. As such, they are no more distant, and perhaps sometimes less so, than other groups of Others. Indeed, Salamandra (2004:20) suggests that Damascene identity claims are not (just) resistance to the state, but are in fact as often directed at other Syrians than the regime. In Chapter 7, I will return to the concept of challenging, incorporating it with ideas of connection and disconnection being part of the same process. Looking at a slightly different set of dots, I will suggest an alternative way of thinking the practice of ‘challenge,’ one that moves away from concepts of resistance.

Challenging, as will be seen, is not necessarily (or only) a resisting of power, but another part of the process of doing (positive) relations.

III.

DOING 'US'

6. Relating to Syria



"Are you Muslim or Christian? Sunni or Shiite? Druzi or 'Alawi? Coptic or Maronite? Greek Catholic or Greek Orth..."

"I am Arab, you jackass!!"

Naji al-Ali

Figure 9: Caricature by the late Naji al-Ali

This final section diverges somewhat from the trends of the previous chapters, which focused primarily on the ways in which “ordinary” Syrians dissociated and disconnected themselves from the regime. In the next two chapters, I aim to expand on the ways that Syrians and the regime are also always connected/ing. I return to the idea that this seemingly ambiguous relationship is not a space of ambiguity for them, but is rather indicative of certain ways in which Syrians do “national” (and perhaps other types of) relations, i.e. *with* difference.

Upending the Scales: Who are Syrians?

Who are the 'Insiders'?

In the introduction, I presented a fairly neat list of the different kinds of people that Syrians described as living within Syria. However, in the intervening chapters, we

have seen many examples where people could and did hold and narrate seemingly opposing descriptions of the world. I have suggested that these are not so much inconsistent as reflective of the fact that people can maintain multiple ways of relating to similar people. I intend to return to that list now and to the fact that Syrians' thought it important to engage in such identity-work. Having engaged in explorations of how 'Syrians' differentiated themselves from other nationalities (thus relating to the world and (re)creating themselves as Syrians) and how they did so from the 'regime' (thus relating to the regime and (re)creating it as external to a unified populace), I am now turning the same sort of analytical focus onto the thus-far assumed category of 'Syrians.' For, while my informants were constantly activating connections between themselves as 'Arabs,' 'Muslims,' 'Christians,' 'Syrians' or 'non-Alawi Syrians,' they were also activating disconnections within and between these categories, momentarily making themselves into different things. Equally, they would define themselves in contrast to such major categories, finding instant camaraderie in being Kurdish and not Arab, in being Communist and not Ba^cthist, in being an 'atheist' (*kāfir*, lit. 'unbeliever' or 'infidel') instead of a believer (*mu'min*) (with 'atheists' being a rather small group, mostly comprised of youth, though not always). Sometimes this could even include whether or not someone was Syrian 'at heart' (*bi qalbho*, f. *qalbha*).

We have seen the ways in which this works in regards to the Alawi sector, a category of people that was othered and distinguished as a distinct 'sect' (*ṭā'ifeh*). Not only were they regarded as backwards mountain folk, they were also members of what, at different points in history, had been considered a heretical religious group by doctrinal Sunnis. Thus Alawis (and the regime that is widely composed of and thus equated with them) were distant and external to people from the city and the more orthodox versions of Islam. Or, if the narrator of a particular story was Christian, the Alawis became just another variety of Muslims, automatically distinguished from the Christian 'inside.'

The Bedouin too were made to be a very remote (physically, socially and culturally) group of people. While sitting at the bus station early one morning, a Syrian friend pointed to an older man sitting by himself and said quietly, "Look, a Bedouin." I looked over and asked my friend how he knew. He said, "See the way

he's dressed? And he has his *siloq* (headscarf) tied in the Bedouin way (*bil-ṭariqah baduwīya*).” The man was dressed in baggy dark trousers and a loose shirt. His *siloq* was a red-and-white checkered pattern, though I had to take my friend's word on the method of tying. “*leiki 'adeish asmar huwa. biyshteghel tūl al-youm bil-shams. nahīf huwa bas qawī ktīr*. (Look at how dark he is. He works all day in the sun. He's wiry [lit. skinny] but so strong.)” The note of awe in my friend's voice was unmistakable. From the way he spoke, I realized that the Bedouin man was as every bit as foreign to my friend as he was to me. He was a mysterious figure, and seemed, for my friend, to have something of the ‘noble savage’ about him.

But this city versus country divide was not the only kind of social division amongst ‘Syrians’ that was narrated and thus activated. For instance, the first family I lived with (with the father who snubbed the secret police agent) thought of themselves as not just Christians, but more specifically Aramaic Christians. In practice, they would exhibit this primarily through the use of language, especially the older generation for whom Arabic was a second language and Aramaic their first.¹²¹ While I was staying there, the oldest daughter of the household got married. The week before the wedding, there were endless parties and gatherings, ranging in size from only the dozen or so family members who lived in the neighborhood to a massive party with the bride's and the groom's extended family, amounting to nearly 60 people packed into the courtyard. Songs were a regular part of these festivities and, though my Arabic was not very strong at that point, I realized I was having more trouble understanding than I could account for. On seeing my confusion, the translator-cousin from the secret police story came over and explained that they were singing in Aramaic. I asked her if she also spoke it, and she shook her head, saying she understood it, but did not speak it. That seemed to be the case for most of the younger generation. When I asked her if she considered herself to be Aramaic, she assured me that she did and that one day she would probably learn the language. Another member of this family, when asked, said that he was only Arabic because the regime said so. They considered themselves to be different from not only the

¹²¹ The family had originally lived in the small town of Ma^cloula some 45 minutes by bus outside of Damascus. They still had a home out there, that they would go stay in for weekends or summer holidays. Much of Ma^cloula's population was Christian, with many of them being native Aramaic speakers.

Muslims of the country, but also anyone who might fit into the category of ‘Arab.’ They as a ‘people,’ (*sha^cb*) considered that they had been in the area long before the Arabs had come in conquest and so were more original or indigenous (*‘aşilna aktar min hadol*) than the Arabic population.

Being Kurdish often involved similar sorts of narrations. I had a number of Kurdish friends (most living in Rukn al-Diin, see Introduction), all immensely proud of their Kurdish heritage. One said that while her parents spoke Kurdish, she did not (cf. Hann 1997), because they never taught it to her. Unlike in the Aramaic case, however, the parents never spoke Kurdish with their children, so my informant did not even understand it, aside from a couple of words like ‘mother,’ or ‘hello.’ Geographically, Kurdish is much more widely spoken in the northern parts of the country. Until very recently, many people of Kurdish descent, especially those in the north, did not even receive Syrian identification cards, meaning that not only would they narrate themselves as distinct from other people living in Syria, they were officially segregated as well. To share a Kurdish-ness brought people together, gave them an instant bond that put them at their ease more than with an unfamiliar Arab. One evening in a taxi, a Kurdish friend was talking lightly to the driver and in reply to something the latter had said, my friend laughed and called the driver ‘Kurdish,’ which is sort of a joking insult, but one with hints of pride when coming from a Kurdish person. The man looked over at my friend and said that he *was* Kurdish, at which point the two launched into a friendly, open conversation that resulted in the driver insisting that we did not have to pay. (We did anyhow.) I myself was even (momentarily) brought into the ‘inside’ of the Kurdish circle one evening. I was with a friend at her house, helping her with her English homework. I was translating a word for her, but when I said it in Arabic, I said it much more heavily than it was supposed to be pronounced. She threw back her head, laughing and said “*Wallah, inti kurdîya* (By God, you’re Kurdish)!” Though mocking, it was funny precisely because she herself was Kurdish, and by calling me Kurdish she also made me a bit more like her, a bit less foreign.

There were similar sorts of disconnections and connections on lines other than ‘religious’ and ‘ethnic’ ones. Actively belonging to a non-Ba^cthist party was a rather distinguishing mark. One informant’s father had been an active member of the

Communist party in Syria before his death, and the son had followed in his footsteps. Being too vocal as a member of a semi-oppositional party¹²² could potentially be dangerous, but he was quietly proud of his political difference, as it made him part of a small and separate group of people. Also, as I mentioned, I met a couple of people who proclaimed to be atheists. This was a particularly differentiating label to apply to oneself, as most Syrians were untroubled with people having a different religion as long as they *had* one. These few tended to keep their beliefs (or lack thereof) to themselves, only sharing it with their closest friends, though rarely their family. I myself rarely felt comfortable telling people I was an atheist, usually passing myself off as Catholic. Twice, however, I told someone I had no religion and found them replying that they were the same. One—an older gentleman and formally a Christian—had even begun by asking me with overly wide eyes (in English), “So, what *sect* of Christianity do you belong to?” and the fact that he was mocking the religion was quite evident from his tone. In this case and the other, the person stood up and shook my hand upon discovering we shared something in common in the midst of a sea of religiosity. Both times, I was reminded of secret handshakes that grant admission to elite clubs and societies. These Syrians made it clear that (in some ways) they were not like other Syrians.

Even the idea of *being* Syrian could be a differentiating characteristic in certain moments. I was friends with a group of young men and women (whom we shall meet in greater detail in Chapter 7) who came from a variety of different backgrounds. Three of them were Kurdish. However, one evening, one of them was describing the other two to me, saying that he and one of the other two were Kurdish, but that the third was Syrian (though none spoke Kurdish and all had been born in Damascus). I asked what he meant and, struggling to explain, he told me that it had something to do with one’s devotion to a place or an ideal. The first two would hold themselves to be Kurdish more than their national identities, but in his heart, the third would place himself with Syrians above his Kurdish counterparts. For instance, if the Kurds somehow managed to get an independent Kurdistan, the third would be the only one not to go live there, because he was attached to Syria *more*. Indeed, the third

¹²² Given that the Ba’th Party is given half the seats of Parliament and the sole ability to nominate presidential candidates in the country’s constitution, opposition parties, especially ones that are along the Communist-Socialist lines, are of little real threat.

one himself later told me that while he loves the idea of a Kurdistan, he would never live there because he loved Damascus; all of his family and life were in that city.¹²³ Thus, even between three similar young men who had similar life experiences, there were lines drawn that disconnected them. Further, such an analysis again problematizes our anthropological notion of scale. While we might see scalar or even categorical (‘ethnic’ versus ‘national’) differences between Kurdish and Syrian labels, these informants perceived them as being variable, depending not on some pre-figured ordering of one ‘over’ the other, but rather on how an individual chose to enact and activate them.

However, having or acquiring a ‘Syrian’ label could also be an inclusive measure. One afternoon, a friend was trying to tell me a joke and asked me what another name for the president (*al-ra’īs*) was. I did not immediately realize it was a joke and so flippantly answered with the phrase that I had often heard (alternating with “Doctor”) epithet for the president (Hafez and Bashar): *ibn sharmūtah* (‘son of a whore’). My friend’s intended joke was forgotten as she burst into laughter, saying that I was becoming Syrian (*inti sa^cireh sūrīyah*).¹²⁴ Again, for a foreigner to ‘become Syrian’ made her somewhat less of an outsider than she was before. In calling the president an *ibn sharmūtah*, I was indicating that I had entered into some form of a shared ‘Syrian’ framework.

Memories of Conflict

Most people I knew could readily come up with some specific sub-category that they belonged to (or could make themselves belong to) and made them distinct from other categories in Syria. Most of them would assure me that, while there was not usually much violence along these various lines of distinction, there had been some. As I have noted above, there had been long-standing difficulties between the regime and the Kurdish population in the north. During my trip to that area of the country, I noticed that there were not nearly as many statues and posters of the presidents in

¹²³ Note the use of ‘Damascus’ versus ‘Syria’ in the two accounts. While the initial speaker was associating him with a broad, general group of people, the second was more specific about which group he wished to belong to.

¹²⁴ I told this story to a Jordanian friend of mine in Edinburgh after I returned from Syria. She too burst into laughter and told me that I had become “Arabic.”

windows and public squares as in Damascus and other towns we had passed through. I asked a (half-Kurdish) friend from the area why that was, and he said that there had been anti-regime riots several years ago and the locals had torn down the statues. The regime had not bothered to replace them, he said, because they would just be torn down again. These clashes may have been fueled by political and economical reasons as much as an emotive 'identity' ones, but when my informant described it to me, he couched it only in terms of a clash of identities (Kurdish vs. Arab/Alawi).

I heard a similar description regarding a violent upheaval in the small city of Suweida in 2000. This conflict did not involve the regime, but was between the majority Druze population of the city and the Bedouin Sunni population who had been leading a semi-nomadic existence in the region for generations. The two sides used machine guns, grenade launchers and road blocks to attack each other. The violence even spread to attacking various individual Bedouin families who had long-since settled in nearby villages. Over the course of three days, 20 people died and 200 more were injured, despite the presence of Syrian military forces attempting to restore peace (*Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 2000). The violence potentially had long-term roots in neighborly dissent, given that much of the tension between the groups seems to have stemmed from continuous and disputed overlaps of Bedouin grazing ground and Druzi orchards and vineyards, but when other Syrians narrated the event, it became one of identity conflict. The category of 'Syrian' as a cohesive insider group did not feature and thus did not exist here. This narration also had another lateral commentary in it, however; namely that the regime did not have the power to immediately quell the violence. This questioned the effectiveness of the regime's ability to regulate its population, and thus cast quiet doubt on their appropriateness as leaders.

But these memories of violence between people who might be 'the same' in other narrations were not limited to events within Syria alone. Syrians also recalled various conflicts in Iraq, describing the tensions between groups of people (Shi'as, Kurds, Sunnis, etc.) as they tried to come to terms on a new government. But even more poignant were the memories of the civil war and recent frictions in Lebanon. These countries were said to be tearing themselves apart because they consisted of such fragmented people. In fact, I was told, their problem was precisely that they

were *not* ‘a people’—they were an artificial amalgamation of distinct categories of people who have no reason or desire to work together (hearkening back to the European intrusion narrations). “And Syria is not so different, with all the different categories of people living in a single space, vying for power, money, dominance, prestige, and so on.” According to Syrians’ self-descriptions, their country existed in a similar state of constant tension, with different groups straining to break away from the others, to gain some form of control over themselves, others and resources.

My informants told me that the only reason that Syria had not ripped at the seams thus far was because there was a strong hand keeping everyone in check; i.e. the Asad regime.¹²⁵ As much as Syrians may have differentiated themselves from their leaders, they said they were sure that if that rigid control were to slacken, the country would slip into chaos. An image was presented where, if one string of the web of tension snapped, the whole system would be done for.

It’s that Bedouin mentality, the desire for vengeance if you’ve been wronged. We all have it at heart, we all came from them, and if the regime falls we will all *start* by taking revenge on those who wronged us—the Alawis. And then it will go to hell from there. People turning on each other, lots of blood.

The violence that raged and has raged in neighboring countries would, my friends assured me, be nothing in comparison to the hell that Syria would become (*sūriya rāh tsīr mitl al-jehnum*). “So the regime needs to be hard and strong (*qāsi ū qawī*). We are hard people and it takes an even stronger hand to keep us from killing each other.”¹²⁶ The differences, the lines of disconnection were narrated to be so strong, that if they were given free reign, people feel that they would turn on each other in unstoppable violence. The irony was that the people who were said to be currently holding such hell in check themselves belonged to one of the very groups enmeshed in the web of tension in the first place. The regime, as an extension of the Alawis and therefore fully implicated in the potential conflict *as a people* (*sha^cb*), did not

¹²⁵ Dresch (1984:45-6) notes similar descriptions of tribal leadership in Yemen: “Much of what people in tribal Arab societies say about local politics can seem thoroughly contradictory; on the one hand the values of opposition at every level are extolled and the idea that wrongs be righted only by the temporary coalitions of ‘brothers’ against outsiders, but on the other hand constant squabbles are condemned and someone powerful is looked for to end them by cracking heads together.”

¹²⁶ See Ibn Khaldoun (2005) for similar descriptions (from the 14th century CE) of the *inherent* human need for a strong leader to keep violence at bay.

necessarily have any more right to rule than any other group of people. But then again, they had no less right. Either way, what was foregrounded here was the importance of *someone* being in power.¹²⁷ Other people might have disliked who it was in particular, but it was likely they would have found fault with anyone(s) occupying the position. In a sense, they had a common ground (connection) in the fact that they all seemed to feel that no one group was inherently fit to rule.

Connecting to the Regime

Given the academic and popular pre-occupation with the idea of ‘social identity,’ it can be somewhat difficult to examine it as an ethnographic object without getting caught in the mire that surrounds it. What might be more intuitive are the sorts of interpersonal relations that ordinary Syrians had with their regime, the lines along which they were potentially connected (and so implicated!), and the ways and moments in which they activated those connections. To do so, I will examine two regular and expected (for Syrians) manners of engaging with the regime that I have only lightly touched on in previous chapters: *reshweh* (bribery) and the use of *wasṭa* (‘connections’).

Routine Bribery

Reshweh was a very regular and very expected form of interaction with anyone who has official status in Syria. Though we, as Euro-American foreigners, grumble about the immorality of bribery, especially in any sort of official or political business, it was less morally problematic for Syrians. Unlike in other transactions we have seen, this form was a two-way exchange, with something being given in return, and was an effective economy for getting things done quickly and readily. There was always the option not to engage in bribery, as long as one was willing to wait. And, in the way that Jean-Klein (in press) describes morality as an aesthetic process, in Syria it was also the aesthetics and proper form of the situation that created it as morally

¹²⁷ Though she doesn’t necessarily use similar examples, this kind of statement fits with Wedeen’s (1999:92) argument that Syrian “politics of ‘as if’ depends on a self-conscious submission to authority.” Or at least, in this case, the awareness of the *need* for authority.

appropriate. As long as it was never blatant, as long as it was done discreetly (indeed, one could possibly say that the respective parties were *conspiring* to keep it out of sight), and no one got hurt by it, then it was acceptable. *Reshweh* often happened in dealings with various regime officials or offices, but was not limited to these people. I had a friend who was working on a restoration project for an old-style house in the Old City. He said that the problem with such a big project was that once people realized that you were willing to use bribery to help smooth things over with the various ministries involved in restoration, everyone would be coming and insisting on being paid. This included even people living in nearby houses, who would hint that they would report various shortcuts or problems unless they were given incentive not to.

Education, too, could be enhanced with bribery. There are several small universities and colleges in Damascus and some in Aleppo as well, but the largest is the University of Damascus. It is funded by the regime and students can attend free of charge, provided they have scored high enough on the entrance/high school exams. The professors and lecturers' salaries are not bad, but are not necessarily the best-paying jobs either.¹²⁸ I was initially amazed at the levels of bribery my university-attending friends were either involved in or privy to. These sometimes took the form of university students paying other students to do their work for them, and in the case of young women, this could involve dates as payments. Sometimes students would pay their professors in order to pass a class or graduate, a deal that was usually initiated by the students, but occasionally by the professors themselves. And this was no small sum. One informant was asked by his professor for a fee of 5,000 lira (\$100) to help him get through the last class before graduation. This student chose instead not to graduate until some years later when the professors had changed, though he admitted this had more to do with his being angry at being singled out than at the idea of having to pay in and of itself. Bribery could also involve students taking private and expensive tutoring sessions with their lecturers that were all-but-required to pass the course.

¹²⁸ For instance, one informant was offered a full-paid post-graduate course in the UK if he would agree to work for the university for ten years after he finished his degree. He chose to refuse it because, he said, they would not pay him enough to afford a decent house or a car.

Or, similar to their actions with other students, young women students would sometimes arrange to go on ‘dates’ with their professors. I saw this happen twice. Before the first date, each girl enlisted the help of male classmates to set up the time and place. The latter would also attend the meeting, to provide appropriate introductions and to give the impression to anyone who might be watching (which included most everyone in a particular venue) that this was just a group outing and nothing of particular interest. In fact, I was usually invited along to help support the appearance of a light-hearted meeting—having more than one woman present, especially one who was foreign and known around the neighborhood, would help deflect whispers about indecency. On one occasion we went to a café in the Old City and on the other to a restaurant. Both were somewhat uncomfortable, for myself, but also for the other females, who were nervous, talking little and watching the men (who dominated the conversation) somewhat hesitantly. The girl’s male friends would then split the bill, as a favor to her, which she would later repay by taking them out for a meal. I was told that after this initial meeting, it was up to the woman to arrange for further meetings. I asked one of my friends what happened afterwards, and he grew uncomfortable, shrugged, and said, “Well, you know... But it depends really. Sometimes nothing happens after.” I shook my head and mumbled something about actually getting an education, at which point he laughed and said, “This is Syria. There is no ‘education’ here.” Perhaps. But I would argue that the participants were, through this process, refining their techniques of maintaining the proper forms in the use of bribery. It also helped to create and reinforce chains of connections, making it also a form of *wasta*.

But *reshweh* involving the regime was much more common than these other moments. There are signs posted in the passport offices at border crossings that read “To engage in bribery is to enter prison.” Regardless of this sign, 50 lira notes pass in a one-way stream all day long, tucked away in passports or sometimes concealed in a handshake. It is not flaunted by one side or the other, but takes place quietly and out of sight. No eye contact is made when the passport is first opened, nor is any acknowledgment of the money’s presence, aside from a speeded-up process of being passed through. Further, and importantly, the bribery in this sort of official situation is restricted to men. The men working at the counters feel odd about taking money

from women, turning the situation from an effective economy to an uncomfortable issue of pride, as one informant described it. Foreigners, because they generally are not well-educated in the proper etiquette of *reshweh*, frequently go without it, but the officers seemed to expect this as well. It is somewhat more regular for foreigners to engage in the practice in the Passport and Immigration Ministry (if not common), though the gender interaction is still somewhat tricky.

It was a useful system though, if one knew how to navigate it. The first time I went to get my visa extended, I spent at least two hours in the Ministry, running from queue to queue, filling out reams of paperwork in triplicate (which later became quadruplicate and, adding to the complications, was written in only Arabic and French), and getting forms signed by several bored, high-ranking officers who seemed to have no job aside from signing forms and did not even glance at what they were putting their pens to. After I managed to finally work my way through all of this, I handed everything in and was told I would have to come back in a couple of days to pick up my passport and new visa. I decided the next time to try and avoid this mass of complications. Having learned about the gender concerns, a male Syrian friend (who knew someone who knew someone who worked in the Ministry) offered to accompany me and he quietly spoke to one of the men at the desk and slipped him the already-filled-in paperwork and my passport, with 500 lira folded into its pages. We then stood in one place for about five minutes while an underling scurried about the offices and returned with everything signed, stamped and ready to go.

Things generally went smoother in the sections of Ministries that did not have to deal with foreigners, as people were more accustomed to how they were meant to progress. For instance, while I was in Syria, the country was in the process of changing its national identity cards. For the average person, applying for a new one could involve weeks, with much of that time spent in massive queues. However, those willing to place a little money into the right hands could speed the process up substantially. If one had enough money, it was not even necessary to leave one's house—in a day's time, everything would arrive on one's doorstep. Similarly, getting new passports and getting passports renewed could take varying amounts of time, depending on the amount of money spent. One informant told me about the day he went to get his passport renewed:

I got there and there was a really, really long queue. I knew I would be there for hours. But then I saw a policeman that I knew, walking in the office. He came over and asked what I was doing and I told him. He told me I didn't need to wait in the line, that he could help. So I gave him 200 lira (\$4) and he grabbed my paperwork and walked right to the front of the line and into the other office. He took care of everything in about five minutes. When he came back I asked him, "What about my thumbprint? Don't they need that?" He said yeah, but that he had just used his own. It didn't really matter anyway. [Laughs] As long as no one ever actually checks. At least the signature was mine.

Which is not to say that people were always happy about engaging in bribery and its prevalence throughout Syria. One evening a taxi driver, while passing a police officer,¹²⁹ began to grumble about how all of them made nearly \$100-\$200 (U.S.) a day because of *reshweh*. He got quite angry about their choosing to fill their own wallets at the expense of people like him, who had no real choice but to pay. "If you pay, you can go. If not, they will give you trouble." Bribery, it seems, was only something that was appropriate in certain situations, i.e. when it was voluntary and got something in return, rather than being mandatory to get out of a ticket one would not have had otherwise.

Wasta

But bribery alone in such situations was not enough. As important as it was to know how much to spend here or there and how to appropriately pass it across, it was doubly so to know *who* to hand the money to. There was nothing random or arbitrary in how the process was organized. The university girl needed to know fellow students who were on friendly terms with the professor. At the borders, the traveler needed to know which officers to hand money to and when. And it was only by knowing a conveniently-placed police officer that my friend was able to get his passport renewed so quickly. "*Wasta*" one of my friends told me, "is the most important word you can know in Arabic." Having the right connections made the little problems of daily life disappear much more readily than without. It provided a

¹²⁹ The officer was stationed alongside a traffic light. Indeed, all traffic lights generally have a police officer manning them as well. When I asked why, a friend told me that it was because no one would respect the light if there was not someone there to make sure they respected it.

way out of military service or a way into the best jobs or university subjects. But connections, as I have noted elsewhere, are continuously being made in the course of being activated, an idea that is no less true for *wasṭa* connections than it is for narrated ones. In the moments when they are not actively being engaged, they exist as *potentials* of connections.

Indeed, the story by which I finally figured out how to get my visa involved the activation of an entire chain of connections; my problems provided an opportunity for the various links to ‘exercise’ their *wasṭa*. Upon hearing my visa worries, a friend’s husband spoke to a coworker of his who knew someone who worked in the Passport and Immigration Ministry. He was the one who then accompanied me to the office, where, armed with a name, we were able to go straight to the man his friend knew, who in turn directed his underlings to take care of everything quickly in return for the subtly-paid fee. All of the initial series of conversations had happened without my knowing it. I was only brought in at the end, when my friend told me that I was going to the office with her husband. But my friend warned me that we did not want to pull these strings too often or overuse them, because the more we did so, the more we put my friend in debt to the other two parties in the connection. The way was paved for further connections to be made along this chain.

Perhaps this could be considered as a form of patron-client relationship (Schwarz 2004), with the regime bureaucrat in the role of patron, my friend’s husband as the client and the man in the middle as a client to the former and a patron to the latter. The man in the office was certainly in a superior position in regards to bureaucratic power and, once properly paid, could provide a unique service for my friend (and thus me). He equally had the power to restrict or delay the process, should he have been inclined to hinder rather than help. However, I have several qualms about applying a patron-client label to this situation (and others like it involving *wasṭa*). Indeed, Khoury (1987:22) notes that by the late 1930’s patronage was no longer feasible in Damascus due to the massive population influx of people from the countryside. He argues that from that time “increasing numbers of people sought support and services outside the old framework of patronage.” In terms of my own research, I found that such a system does not quite account for the role of the

middle man. He was patron to one and client to the other, but received nothing obvious from either transaction. I would argue that what he got was the opportunity to activate connections, which would enable him to re-activate either one in either direction in the future. In a world where *waṣta* is the “most important” thing one could know, such connections are a very real currency.

Secondly, patron-client relations, as portrayed in the literature, generally assume a set hierarchical direction; it is fairly clear who holds the power and thus would enact the patron role. However, while the man in the office may have held bureaucratic power, in this situation my friend’s husband held a greater economic power (keeping in mind that the former *was* working with non-Arab foreigners and so was less likely to receive *reshweh* than his counterparts working with Arabs). Further, my informant was an employee of roughly equal status in another (non-regime) office that potentially had some interest for the Ministry officer. That my informant was cautious about over-using the connections because he did not want to accrue too much potential “debt” (*dayn*) indicates that the connections may well have been reversed at some point with the former “patron” now acting as a “client” to the man who had formerly been his “client.” With the exchange of money and visa, that particular transaction had been fulfilled with no debts left hanging; however, because my informant had done the asking initially, there remained the possibility of a re-activation of the connections, with the other side asking for favors. That such a moment might arise was made clear when the *waṣta* was activated from the other side, though not in asking for favors. For it happens that this chain of connections was the same that provided me with the warning about the rumors involving myself and a “person who had been in Israel.” What this friendly warning had done, among other things, was to reopen the lines of connection, (re)creating and (re)affirming their presence. In providing an unasked-for favor, the officer was paving the way for a time when he might wish my informant to provide something for him. He was preparing the chain to allow himself to become the “client.”

“Classic” patron-client relations usually involve a fixed and unequal distribution of power. However, Syrian *waṣta* involved men of equal status (if by somewhat different measures) who were engaged in *moments* of power imbalance that could shift one was just as easily as the other. Further, making or strengthening

the connections themselves could in itself be a currency in these transactions. I would suggest, then, that the patron-client model can also be subsumed into the connecting-the-dots model, whereby the roles of patron and client are only momentarily created in the course of a transaction, but the hierarchy they create is not set in stone. It can shift just as easily the other way. It would only be if they were continuously activated in one direction that they would gain an effect of permanence, much in the way we saw with identity categories.

What makes all of this particularly interesting is that if anyone in Syria tried hard enough to trace the lines of potential networks of *wasṭa*,¹³⁰ they would be able to find some kind of connection to the regime. Anyone who went through their military service got connections via that time served (meaning service was not necessarily all a loss), just as many who managed to dodge their service did so because of an already existing (potential) connection. Informants who told narrations of international conspiracy and interspersed them with ‘contextualized’ moments were acknowledging (and thus activating) a personal connection to the very regime they were also criticizing. What we can take from this, then, is that no matter how far Syrians discursively distanced themselves from the regime (or other ‘groups’) through the course of narration and lived experience, everybody had connections to that same regime. As disconnected as they may have made themselves, they were also inevitably—if potentially—connected. The fact that so many of them were willing to activate potential connections, from being complicit in *reshweh* with a regime official or calling up contacts in the Passport Ministry, suggests that they were willing to accept the fact that they were connected. In fact, they continuously made themselves so.

Return of the Mukhābarāt

Agents or Everyday People?

I return now to the secret police, though this time they will take on a slightly different aspect than they had in the previous chapter. The *mukhābarāt* would seem to most

¹³⁰ I find myself reminded of the game *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*, premised on the ‘six degrees of separation’ idea, which posits that there are no more than five intermediaries between any two specific people on the planet.

strongly embody the violent aspect of the regime, representing its ability to use secrecy and force to monitor its own population. If anyone was external to the ordinary people of Syria and internal to the regime, it would be these agents. And they were ubiquitous, if the rumors are to be believed; nearly 20% of the population of Syria was said to work or have worked for the secret police at some point. It indeed seems that “you can’t trust anyone outside of your immediate family.” But 20% is a lot of people. Granted, much of this percentage is probably concentrated within specific networks rather than scattered evenly throughout the populace. But even taking that into account, what is the likelihood that an individual Syrian would *not* know at least one person who worked for the *mukhābarāt*? Or even if they do not know one personally, it is very likely that they know someone who knows someone. Unlike the elites of the regime, such a massive force cannot be entirely peopled with Alawis: the ranks would have to be partly filled by the non-Alawi population. This is especially true if the regime wants an effective monitoring agency, because most Syrians would be automatically suspicious of anyone with a strange accent.¹³¹

Part of the insidiousness of *mukhābarāt* agents is that they *are* so close to the rest of the population. They could be anyone—friends, neighbors, or even family. They could very well be people that Syrians might, in other situations, consider to be ‘insiders.’ And yet, at the same time, they are the kind of people who would betray a friend or neighbor to the regime officials. It is a hard duality to reconcile. People were rarely willing to speak about their personal connections to secret police agents. They would describe them as family members or friends and then only shyly, or as (if) an afterthought, mention who they worked for. The way such informants narrated their relations to these *mukhābarāt* agents was indicative of an ambiguity—not necessarily in how *they* related to the agents, but rather how to tell a third party about these persons’ status as both ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’

As my informants might have predicted, it was I who had more trouble balancing the affability of a personable individual with the cold face of the regime. On a trip to the north of Syria, I was traveling with two German diplomats and a Syrian friend. We drove in the Germans’ car to do some sightseeing, staying at the

¹³¹ While traveling with Syrians within Syria, I noticed that they had a tendency to dodge questions about themselves, including names and where they were from. When I asked why, one informant got defensive and said sharply “Because it’s none of their business!” (*le’annu mu sheghelhun!*).

home of a (Syrian) friend of my friend in the town of Hasakah. Shortly after our arrival at his house, there was a knock on the door. The two Syrians answered and later told me that it was the secret police. They had wanted to let us know that the diplomatic license plates had been spotted on our route northward and that, since we were staying in Hasakah, local agents would be around to make sure everything went smoothly. There was the feeling that they were keeping an eye on us, but also that they wanted to keep us safe. The next morning, we and our local friend went out for breakfast. There were two *mukhābarāt* cars with us, one in front and one behind, both white and none too subtle. There was no pretense, no attempts to follow us surreptitiously; everyone was aware of the situation, making it open and almost friendly. When we stopped at a restaurant, our friend told us that one of the officers on duty was actually his *khāl* (mother's brother) who, upon hearing his nephew was hosting the foreigners, asked to have himself assigned to us. As we sat down, the uncle and the other agents came in and ate with us and even paid the bill, despite our protests. They then proceeded to take us on a tour of their town, excitedly insisting on showing us all the best sites and walking around with us at each. It felt more like being hosted by family and friends than being followed by a security agency. They were even kind enough to radio ahead to each of the small villages nearby that we visited so that an escort could pick us up. Of course, this had the ulterior motive of continuing to keep track of us, but each set of agents (all in white cars) was very friendly and did not play at being secret. When we finally left, they escorted us to the edge of the city, waved us off, and even called us on a mobile phone (we had exchanged numbers for convenience) to say goodbye. The formidable *mukhābarāt* had been, in this instance, a couple of friendly guys doing their job, but making us feel welcome in their town and their country at the same time.

The *mukhābarāt*, then, could be several things at once. It was an impersonal organization that would betray any and everyone to its regime masters. It was responsible for snatching 'dangerous' people off of the street and throwing them in prison without trial or access to the outside world. Informants and agents seemed to be reviled and hated for what they did. And yet, it could also be considered as a job, a way for regular guys to make money. As *individuals*, they were portrayed (or experienced) as nice, generous people, the kind of people you would probably invite

over for dinner. They were not faces of some distant regime, but neighbors and family members trying to get by.

Sometimes connections with the *mukhābarāt* were even less official than that. According to my informants, at least some of the *mukhābarāt* activity was more a neighborhood vengeance machine than a watchful regime, especially under Hafez al-Asad. One evening I sat with my friends Yasmeen and Husam in their comfortable, if not spacious, New City home, watching television. During a commercial break, Husam began telling me about satellite.

Everything is fine now, but several years ago, it was illegal to have an unregistered dish. But lots of people, like us, still had them. So we used to cover ours during the day and then uncover it and put it in position at night when we wanted to watch television. Our neighbors were fine about it, but a lot of people had problems with their neighbors reporting on each other to the *mukhābarāt*. If the *mukhābarāt* came and caught them, people would be heavily fined and lose the dish. Most of that came from jealousy—if the police were doing a random search for unlicensed dishes and found one in a neighborhood, that guy, after losing his, would probably be pretty quick to point out all the other ones nearby because, he would think “Why should they get to keep theirs and not me?”

In this case, it was not necessarily that the *mukhābarāt* themselves had such a strong presence, but that bitter neighbors or those with a grudge might report a person just to get him or her in trouble. These people reporting on their neighbors were not official members of the force, but everyday men and women who would use the *mukhābarāt* as a secretive method of acting on their ire (or working for personal gain—remember the ‘monkeys and bananas’ metaphor). Again we see just how close the ‘regime’ can be in the everyday lives of its people. These neighbors were not formally allied with the ‘outsiders,’ but the narration indicates that their actions made them no longer insiders. But the fact that anyone could potentially be a snitch indicated that everyone, at the very least, knew how and where to go to report on their neighbors. The occasional activated connection illuminated the fact that everyone had a potential one; if anyone could be thus implicated in the regime, it calls into question the outside-ness of the regime at all.

My Aunt's House

A final, and rather interesting connection to the *mukhābarāt* was that the popular 'code name' for talking about the secret police was to call them 'my maternal aunt's house' (*beit khālti*). I cannot help but wonder if this code name was used somewhat ironically, to emphasize a point. In my experience of Syrian family structures, people's relationships with their mothers' sisters' families was generally one of affection (Joseph 1994:63). The children of such a family would usually be of a different patronymic lineage¹³² and there were not many, if any, financial or protective responsibilities between two sisters and their families.¹³³ It did, however, contain the *potential* for future responsibility, as the children of these sisters were part of the pool of marriageable partners (if not "preferred"). I only knew two families who kept in very close contact with their maternal aunts' families. In one case, my friend's mother had three sisters, all of whom were very close (and a brother). My friend told me that when one of her aunt's sons had died, her mother had been almost as grief-stricken as the boy's mother, having considered the boy to be almost like a son to her as well. My friend's older brother was also engaged to marry another one of his mother's sister's daughters. The sisters were always traveling to visit each other, though one lived as far away as Amman. When all together, they would mock each other, pointing out the other's flaws, giving as good as they got, and dissolving into laughter (usually at my bewildered expression).¹³⁴ It was a close relationship, with strong, frequently-activated connections, but one mostly of affection; if one were in need of financial support, she would approach her brother and not one of her sisters.

¹³² I am reminded that this might not be the case if FBD marriage prevails and has done so for several generations. However, as Eickelman (1989:177) remarks, FBD marriage might be said to preferred but is highly variable in actual practice. He cites the average percentage of Middle Eastern marriages that were FBD as 10-15%, with much higher local percentages in places like Afghanistan and much lower in urban areas like Beirut. In my experience, Syrians, especially middle class Syrians, did not adhere to this rule. I knew of only one family where this marriage system had been in use for at least two generations, and the members of youngest one (in roughly their mid-20's) were insistent on marrying outside the family.

¹³³ This is in contrast to brothers, where there would be a degree of responsibility and restraint in addition to affection.

¹³⁴ Indeed, this constant testing was as much a part of their closeness as their mutual affection, a point I will return to in Chapter 7.

But relations between sisters could also be strained. The other family I knew had an older sister-pair at the center of it, the younger of whom had never been married. The older one was in her early 60's and did not always get along with the younger, who tended to be "incredibly moody and very inhospitable. She uses people for favors and then never returns them. She can get angry without warning or reason and likes to make everyone miserable." The older one's daughter (my friend) and her mother continued to spend time with and visit the temperamental aunt, but reluctantly and only for short periods if they could manage it. They had a social responsibility to her though, to keep her company and give her things to do. And the somewhat estranged aunt was not always poor company. When she was happy, my friend said, she could be your best friend. "But when she is grumpy, we can't do anything about it. My (maternal) uncle could—no, *should*, since their parents are dead—say something to her, but he's not strong enough. My mom wants to, but can't. What a mess." According to my friend, then, amongst grown siblings there is a chain of responsibility, where it is the parents or the brothers who are meant to chastise those who may be out of place, and not a sister, even an older one, and certainly not a niece or nephew.

So, people's relations with their aunts would likely be at least affectionate, if not always enjoyable. There was no financial responsibility or authority expected towards or from the aunt, but there would be a degree of closeness and familiarity. By referring to the *mukhābarāt* as *beit khālti*, Syrians were evoking this familiarity and familial affection. The *mukhābarāt* were thus connected to the people they were policing; they were known figures, not faceless shadows, as much like ordinary Syrians as one's aunt. Syrians, though, may have also used it as an ironic trope, to humorously expose just how *unlike* a visit to the *mukhābarāt* was from the affectionate, familiar times spent with an aunt. But even if it were meant to be tongue-in-cheek, the connections of closeness were narrated through the use of the term.

What the use of this term also contains is a shifting relationship between ordinary Syrians and the *mukhābarāt* (and through them, the regime). My argument for this is premised on the somewhat unconventional use of a female name after the word *beit*; it is unusual to speak of the house of a *female* relative. That one would do

so indicates first that the aunt is married, otherwise she would (traditionally) be living with her parents or her brother. It is entirely possible that she would have children as well. Further, referring to *beit khālti* would suggest that she was not involved in a FBD marriage, because were that the case, she would be married to the speaker's paternal uncle (*‘amm*) and the house would more likely be referred to as *beit ‘ammi*. That, at least in informal situations, the house would be referred to as one's aunt's house, indicates that the speaker is not familiar or close with his aunt's husband. Such an aunt, married to an outsider and mother to his children, would occupy a somewhat liminal status. She retains her affiliation to her natal family, who will come to her aid or defense if necessary (cf. Gilsenan 1996), but she is also now a part of her husband's family, with ties and loyalty to him. One could never be wholly certain what she might or might not reveal to the other family. While she would be an insider through affection and close relations, she would also be an outsider, in that she was married to one and her loyalty could (and probably should) lie with her husband. At the same time, marriages between members of formerly unrelated groups were often used to help cement an alliance between the two. And often in Arab societies, this means that "one's wife's kinsman...should be granted help when they demand it" (Dresch 1989:289). Translating this across to the *mukhābarāt*, it would put them in a similar duplex status, where they are cast as insiders (members) of the ordinary population, but also have loyalty to an external group (the regime) and thus are also outsiders. Such a figuration would also account for the informers who are not paid members of the *mukhābarāt*; they have a relationship with the regime and their loyalties are dubious, but they are still neighbors and friends. That one does not always know who might be an informer, merely means that friends, neighbors and (some) family are all potentially suspect. And the regime itself occupies a duplex position, being both outsiders (as the in-law), but also as insiders, brought into the kinship network through the 'marriage' and now responsible to the population should they ask for help. Thus the regime, through the *mukhābarāt*, shifts between being an outsider and an insider. And everyone, through their mutual 'aunt,' was revealed as implicated in and connected to the regime. And if the agents ('wives') of the regime were ordinary people, it would follow that the regime (as

‘husband’) was not so much a thing-in-itself that existed ‘up there,’ but was composed of (and created by) ordinary people.

Further, the very use of the term *beit khalti* returns us to the idea mentioned in the previous chapter that the regime can, in some ways, almost be considered as a ‘house.’ Here that connection is made very explicit, and it lends strong support to the idea that middle class Syrians can and do interact with (this arm of the regime) as if it were a house, with all the competition and tension that such relations can involve. If the regime (or parts of it) can be a house, then the clear lines of who or what the regime is continue to shift.

Could ‘We’ Do Better?

In light of the connections between ‘people’ and the ‘regime’ that exist alongside (or in tandem with?) the disconnections, we are suddenly faced (as Syrians always are) with a certain duplexity regarding the nature of the relationship between the two. Given that ‘ordinary’ non-regime Syrians engage in the same processes of bribery and informing as their regime countrymates, in practice, it suddenly becomes a lot more difficult to make a clear distinction between one and the other. With this in mind, we can now return to the fact that, despite all of their complaints and accusations of immorality against the regime, I never once heard one of my informants claim to be able to do it better.¹³⁵ The critiques merely ended with an affirmation that the Alawis were not properly prepared or equipped to do an adequate job. Perhaps the implication was there, but it was never formed into an explicit comment, nor really hinted at, as far I was aware. This lack reflected, I would argue, an uncertainty as to who or which (momentarily created) ‘group’ had any sort of legitimate claim to authority, or indeed that *any* group could have such a claim. A rocky past (constantly relived and recreated through narrations) of divisive state-building and colonial rule intermixed with the more unifying processes of nation-building (as ‘Arabs’ and as ‘Syrians’) had left people with no ‘obvious’ place they should turn to for leadership. The sometimes tainted, sometimes exonerated mark of

¹³⁵ I would like to thank Alex Smith for first bringing to my attention the importance of whether or not people *did* claim to be able to do better, given that he had found such claims in his own research based in Scotland.

the Other could be found (or placed) anywhere. Foreigners provided models for the political economy, but were also implicated in unwanted and detrimental interference in Syrian affairs. A regime put in place by such foreigners was not considered legitimate; nor was it legitimate in its own right. But no other, more acceptable, options for leadership were offered up. The only thing that seemed to be agreed upon was that there was an urgent and ongoing need for the presence of some kind of rulers (and critical observers), to keep the tension from snapping.

To help illustrate what I mean here, let me return briefly to the Bank Manager archetype, though this time in a slightly different form. In one version of this story, the main figure was described not as a bank manager, but as a military officer. However, aside from his position, all of his other specifics remained much the same. He was from a backwards village and knew nothing about running a military operation. Beyond just being incompetent, this officer would actually steal and hoard things for his own benefit, especially food. He would take bread rations that were meant for the soldiers and hide them under his bed, to keep for himself and for his cow. But like his bank manager counterpart, he was also a somewhat pitiable figure, for when I asked the narrator of this story why he stole the bread, I was told that it was because he was used to starvation. This poor man spent his entire life eking out a meager existence from the land; he never knew wealth or luxury. He spent much of his childhood in a constant state of starvation. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he found himself elevated to a position of power, but continued to remember the years of hunger. To protect himself, to ensure that he never returned to that state, he gathered and hoard as much food as he could. Even if it was detrimental to someone else, he wanted to be sure that he and his family would never go hungry again. Here, one feels bad for the poor starving boy of the past; it was not his fault. Further, his reaction in the present, the abuse of his position, while immoral, is understandable to a degree. Who would not do their best to protect themselves from starvation? His reaction was portrayed as perhaps being somewhat primitive—stealing and hoarding rather than saving and investing (e.g. in land), but this is a further reflection of the ignorance stemming from his shallow background. He is flawed, but excusably so.

But are we really talking about food here, about bread and water? This particular narration had a postscript, where its teller explained to me that other

people were ‘starving’ now; in fact, everyone who was not an Alawi or working for the regime was starving. If we read this story in a different light then, perhaps it is not that the officer really (or only) starved for food in his childhood, but rather that he and his kin were starved for a measure of political-economic power that they did not possess while scraping out a living as poor mountain folk. This man, and those he represents, were suddenly given the opportunity to rise from nothingness into the ranks of movers and shakers. They became not only sovereign over themselves, but over an entire country, and began to steal and hoard on a much broader level. But one still feels bad for the officer. One may not agree with his methods and may think him somewhat incompetent, yet remains understanding of where he is coming from and *why* he is doing what he is doing. But there is a warning. Now it is everyone *else* who is starving for the political power, wealth and nouveau prestige that is being monopolized by the members of the regime. There is no telling how the officer (or the bank manager) got into power—it is presumably by some other means than his own; he lacks agency in changing his own position, though does have the ability to act once he has been raised up. In these actions, he secured his own ‘food’ but in doing so created a situation where a portion of those under him were reduced to starvation. Perhaps this was inadvertent or unintended, but it was the outcome nonetheless. The pressure of starvation that once filled him is now growing in others. But this is not a warning of the potential for a popular resistance or revolution—there is no agency for change. The warning was that if any of these now-starving people(s) somehow came to power, they would steal and hoard in exactly the same way that the members of the current regime do. The Alawis have done and are doing despicable and immoral things, but if one understands the reasons and the consequences, it seems that that would be true of anyone. Ontologically, ‘We’ (ordinary Syrians) are not ‘Them’ (members of the regime), but perhaps We could be if the circumstances changed.

The obvious challenge to such an interpretation is the narration’s emphasis on the manager/officer’s background. His reactions are only understandable inasmuch as he is not a civilized, refined being. He does not know any better. And, as I noted earlier, part of what such narrations do is to create a disconnection between Alawis and non-Alawis based on this distinction of prestige. But as I have

also shown, narrations are capable of ‘doing’ multiple and sometimes seemingly opposing relations at the same time. This is especially true if we take this archetype into consideration alongside one of the previously mentioned descriptions of the multiple and precarious tensions that underlie Syrian society. My informants insisted that the real problem stemming from the too-many-categories-of-people tensions derived from the fact that everyone still had a “Bedouin (i.e. violent) mentality,” regardless of where they were from. Everyone had the almost instinctive tendency to return to a “primitive” state, not unlike that which gave rise to the starving officer. Bloodshed, retribution and the insurance that one will never ‘starve’ again would be foremost on *everyone’s* minds, should the power structure somehow be altered now. Taking all this into account, I would argue that the lack of a “We could do better” refrain is an acknowledgment of the fact that people do not necessarily think that they could, or perhaps *would* do any better a job as an effective or moral leader than the members of their current regime. The question of legitimate authority becomes that much more complicated. Maybe no one has it.

And if even great and respectable figures like Rafik Hariri and Yassar Arafat can be corrupted by politics, then it is to be expected that anyone would be corruptable. The immediately relevant implication of this is that the regime is not (only) different and distant. On some levels, the people of the regime are just like, and in fact *are*, ordinary Syrians. That They happen to be in power now and are somewhat less than competent in running the country to the satisfaction of all of its citizens is not necessarily *exclusively* their fault. The regime are narrated to be *a group of people*, one that must be as constantly (re)created to exist as any other ‘group,’ by themselves and others. They are capable of making the same mistakes and susceptible to the same weaknesses as other people and, as such, are not so formidable or external at all. And most everyone has or can make connections with “members” of the regime, making personal lines that of connection that cut across the differentiations between inside and outside ‘groups.’ The regime is not an ideological concept; it is people, just like everyone else. And everyone can be implicated in it.

7. Everyday Forms of Knowing

Whenever a man is alone with a woman, the Devil makes the third. (Hadīth Ahmad and al-Tirmidhi 3118, narrated by Umar Ibn al-Khattāb).

Inside and outside, connections and disconnections: as we have seen, these are some of the ways in which Syrians narrate, understand and ‘do’ politics in the course of their everyday lives. Sometimes these politics concern players and places that are not directly present; sometimes they take place in the most intimate spaces of the home. The ties that bind and those that separate are as likely (if not more so) to be invisible as not, and the aesthetics of an encounter are as important as the dis/connection itself. The regime is narrated as external to non-regime Syrians and is also revealed to be not so different at all. Narrations point to multiple and seemingly contradictory sets of relations at the same time. Nothing in politics stands still. But I would now like to turn somewhat away from politics as such, and embark on a comparative effort. However, it is not so much a comparison to help make my previous, “less well-conceived thoughts” (Strathern 1991:53) more accessible, but rather to explore the ways in which certain processes are similar across various ‘traditional,’ academically-distinguished spheres. That is to say, I am turning away from the doing of Politics towards the doing of Kinship, Friendship and Neighborhood (as if these were discrete and reified categories). I can perhaps be accused of following a path wherein “by virtue of its selectivity, the comparative process itself creates relations of similarity and difference” (Strathern 1991:53, paraphrasing Leo Howe). Indeed, my inclusion and positioning of this chapter is intended to make connections and disconnections. But is that not true of all anthropology, whether explicitly comparative or not? Is that not true of all narrations?

As a caveat, I would like to say that this effort is not a return to looking for kinship models for society. I am not suggesting that people ‘do’ politics according to the ways in which they ‘do’ what they are more familiar with, i.e. kinship or neighborhood relations. What I am suggesting is that the ways that people relate to each other and how they understand and narrate those relations share certain similarities across the ‘spheres’ of political and kinship relations. It would seem to

me that, in the case of Syrian understandings of their world, the boundaries between these categories dissolve into a field of (equally accessible) relations.

This chapter was sparked when I first began thinking of Syrians' political narrations in terms of conspiracy theory, and how they are reproduced in casual, everyday settings.¹³⁶ While digging through my fieldnotes, I came across a moment where one of my informants had been grumbling about the Middle Eastern propensity to engage in conspiracy theorizing, despite also being a perpetrator thereof (by relating such stories to me, regardless of whether or not he held them to be true). It struck me as I was remembering the conversation that what he had been saying did not apply solely to political conspiracies. It was an equally apt description for the way that Syrians understood and narrated their own lives. At that point, I began to literally and quite visually (Figure 10) trace out (and thus create) connections in my work, not just between elements *within* the spheres of politics and kinships, but also across them. In other words, I found my analysis often involved the same processes and analytical 'dots' (e.g. 'Observation', 'Secrets', 'Authority', 'Knowledge', etc.) regardless of whether I was considering Politics or Kinship.

I like to think that my exploration of and simultaneous engagement in the process of connection-making reflect the processes that my informants engaged in. I am trying, here, to leave behind 'foreign' (to Syrians) models for understanding the process of knowledge creation. As anthropologists, we are said to 'shift scales' to do knowledge. As I have said, I am not convinced that the same is true for my Syrian informants. I would argue that their knowledge is derived from the processes of making connections and disconnections, of seeing how things are related to each other and to themselves and making those relations. There are no scales to shift through, no immobile fractals, no overwhelming concerns for transparency. It is instead an ongoing process of tracing out (or over) lines and dots in an ever-shifting system that moves as fast as the speeds of thought and narration.

¹³⁶ I would like to thank Iris Jean-Klein here for posing the deceptively simple question of what I would be writing about if not "politics." What she was suggesting, I think, was that I examine the frameworks Syrians' used to organize their world, rather than casually relying on my own.

enchanted idea [for] a mechanism that once set in motion is able to sustain its own momentum without further inputs of energy, and one that relies only on the conversion of contradictory forces into a product that is greater than the sum of its parts—this miraculous machine that produces and perpetuates social life.

On the contrary, I would argue that the ambiguous duplexity that I present here is not contradictory and there are no obviously distinguishable “parts” to be greater than the “wholes.” If “contradictory” connections and disconnections are the “parts,” then the “whole” must be the created relationship between two objects. But this relationship is nothing more or less than the dis/connections. The “parts” and the “whole” are both a process—the same one. However, this is not to be confused with Wagner’s (1991:162) “fractal person,” for the process of relating is so momentary and shifting that it escapes the rigid bounds of “fractality.” Indeed, unlike a perpetual motion machine, the perpetually moving field of relations is a constant project that requires constant inputs of energy. It is a system that maintains itself *only* because the participants are constantly participating, observing and analyzing—i.e. investing time and energy. The ‘doing’ of relations requires that people be active and engaged. That there is constant motion is both a result of how relations are done and a way by which we do them.

A Question of Trust: Friends and the Dating Game

Sharaf Explained (to the Anthropologist)

The question of trust (*saqah*) came up in many guises during the course of my research and was nearly always problematic in both my informants’ experience and my understanding of it. What the word actually meant seemed to vary according to the person or even the situation, reflecting the problems of definition that academics have also encountered when considering trust (Daniel and Knudsen 1995, Seligman 1997). In one description of it, it is shifting, fragile and constantly sustained, not unlike relations themselves (Peteet 1995).¹³⁷ For Syrians, trust often revolved around

¹³⁷ Julie Peteet (1995) warns us that, because it needs to be constantly reestablished, trust cannot be taken for granted, especially in the case of Palestinian refugees. However, at the same time, she does

what people would be willing to say or do with a particular person (or collection of people). Thus trust was something that was generated through practical performance, the actual act of putting oneself on the line in relation to another person; i.e. the value had a *physical* quality to it. There also appeared to be different types of trust at work in different moments; namely that between participants who were directly involved with each other, and that of (or by) external parties that might be invested in a particular encounter.¹³⁸ For example, a father bringing his son into the family business might *trust* his son not to steal, while neighbors seeing a woman they know walking with a man in the street might *trust* that it is a morally appropriate outing. Such trust concerns were frequently present in male-female relations. With sisters, female kin members, and the maintenance of *sharaf* (I shall attempt to provide a more thorough definition of this term below, but for the moment will gloss it as familial honor that is embodied in women's modesty and virtue and is actively protected by men), both of these above forms of trust might be relevant, especially in moments where younger sisters might be on their own in a school or university setting and thus have unmonitored and potentially unsafe access to men. Outside of such precarious settings, familial relations tended to involve constant observation over females to ensure that no moral boundaries were crossed (as this would reflect poorly on the male's ability to keep his females safe and virtuous). This constant monitoring was discussed not so much as a distrust of the girl,¹³⁹ but rather of the men she might come into contact with. However, the concept of *sharaf* became ever-more complicated, as youth tried to incorporate "non-traditional" forms of social relations into their conceptualizations of the world handed down from older generations. Specifically, this included trying to tackle the problem of dating.

Dating was an often problematic topic, both for me and my informants. I personally dated a lower-middle class Kurdish-Shami Damascene (as he would describe himself) man, who had studied archaeology in university (not one of the

not question the presence and cohesiveness of trust in kinship relationships and amongst Palestinian nationals.

¹³⁸ I am not entirely certain, however, that some of this distinction might stem from the fact that the words 'confidence' and 'trust' in English are both translated as the same word (*saqah*) in Syrian Arabic. The English terms contain subtle connotations that vary in each case that are not directly present as such in the colloquial Arabic.

¹³⁹ Indeed, she was as likely to think it necessary and as much for her benefit as her brother would (cf. Joseph 1994).

more prestigious degrees such as engineering or medicine). He welcomed me to his home and though his family were somewhat unsure of me to begin with, they soon warmed up after they had convinced themselves that we were eventually going to be married (something I had not necessarily considered). Dating in general was most common amongst the middle classes (and likely upper, though I did not have the chance to really meet any of them), mostly centered around youth who attended university. Not only did these students have at least enough money that they could afford to study rather than work, but they also had regular access to members of the opposite sex without official chaperoning. They did, of course, constantly observe each other and if there were multiple siblings in school they were always on the lookout, but young people had a ready space for engagement that they might not have had in earlier times, a rather sticky situation for family reputations and honor in a society where personal and familial identity is centered on the comportment of females and the ability of males to protect them (Joseph 1994).

Early in my research, I was having an impromptu language lesson with some friends of mine. We eventually came to the question of *sharaf*, and I asked for a definition. One friend laughed and said to me, “Ask him [pointing to another young man] *who* his *sharaf* is,” (*mīn sharafak?*).¹⁴⁰ The framing of the concept in this way indicated the centrality of the persons involved (and thus their actions) over a more abstract understanding, emphasizing the idea of the physicality of morality (c.f. vom Bruck 2005:136, and Jean-Klein 2000, specifically the latter’s work on ‘cross-embodiment’). When I asked, my friends were hard-pressed to tell me what the term *meant*, and could only describe how it worked in practice, as if it were something that could not be translated into words but only lived in action. So I turned to the friend and asked him who his *sharaf* was. He gave his friend a withering look, upset at having been put on the spot to describe something that might seem backwards to a “modern,” foreign woman. However, he answered, ticking them off on his fingers, “My mother, my sisters...and my girlfriend.” There was a pause before the last, separating her somewhat from the first two, but ultimately including her. The first friend then took over and told me that this meant that if any other man ever gave the girlfriend a flower, the boyfriend would have to go speak to the offending man. Such

¹⁴⁰ Such a question and the answer is reminiscent of the Yemeni saying that “a woman’s honor is her husband” (vom Bruck 2005:297, note 6).

a reaction was a variation on *sharaf* surrounding kin, where they said that if a brother ever found out his sister was dating someone, he would likely have to beat her. Traditionally, they said, it could lead to the sister's death, but they were under the impression that such killings were less common today.¹⁴¹ They seemed to be uncertain if and how such values should be enacted in a current setting.

In both examples, what was left unsaid, but was present nonetheless, was the implicit sex act, the assumption that the giving of flowers or dating implied the couple had already had or were on their way to having sexual relations. But while there were clear(er) guides for what to do with an offending kinswoman, things became fuzzier with a girlfriend. The mere fact that she was dating already meant that the couple was violating someone else's (her male kin's) *sharaf*, at least in the case of Muslims. Most of the Christian youth who dated would tell their parents and many of the resulting marriages were love matches rather than arranged ones. And I knew of one Muslim woman whose family knew that she was often out with a man. They were not 'dating' per se, but later became engaged to be married. She was 27 and working independently, but even so, she would generally only go out with him when there was someone else present to monitor the situation, be it his mother (who was German and unconcerned with her son's dating habits), an anthropologist, or her younger brother. But most Muslim women who dated did their best to make sure their families never discovered that fact. I had one friend whose family was quite liberal, but she begged me to help her hide the fact that she was dating a man from them and her brother. Young Muslim men were somewhat more flexible in being able to date openly, with some (my boyfriend included) happily introducing their girlfriends to their family. Others, though, preferred to keep their dating lives secret from at least their parents, if not their brothers (as Salamandra notes, in "premarital social and even sexual contact...discretion is key" [2004:52]).

In Christian dating relationships, the assumption was usually that it would eventually lead to marriage on both parts. For Muslim couples, the women would often hope that marriage would be the result, though not always. Muslim men, however, very rarely assumed that a relationship would lead to marriage. The feeling was that the kind of woman one dates is not the kind of woman one marries. I knew

¹⁴¹ Such honor killings and beatings are most certainly a "dark side" of doing kinship, and are no less central to kinship in this setting than the strengthening bonds we might normally associate with it.

one young man who went through several girlfriends over the course of the year I was in Damascus. He was considered quite the “player.” But despite this, he knew the whole time that he wanted to actually marry a distant cousin of his. She was a good woman, staying in the house, modest, quiet, and not the type to ever date. In the meantime though, couples had to conspire and act carefully to ensure that their relationship remained hidden. Morality, as we have seen in other instances of it, had to be enacted according to the proper aesthetic (Jean-Klein in press). If the couple could manage to keep their secret from her family (and anyone who might be able to relate their suspicions to her family), there would be no injury to her relatives’ *sharaf* because the immoral act had not happened. It was only upon discovery of the relationship that the immoral, damaging act became realized (regardless of whether or not their *was* any such act—see below) and actuated. Thus, secrecy was everything.

Equally problematic was the trust between the dating couple and the concern that if a girlfriend was now embodying a man’s *sharaf*, then he must take as much care of and over her as he would his sisters. A girlfriend constantly had to be observed (because one never knew when someone might try to entice her away) and encouraged (but not forbidden) to live a quiet life and stay inside or with girlfriends. But the worries of transgression were not a one-way street, with only men being concerned that their girlfriends might cheat on them. For women in such relationships, it was expected that the men they were seeing were not being loyal. A number of girlfriends told me that

Arab men are awful for dating—they always have more than one girlfriend at a time. Some might have as many as nine or ten. It’s very rare to find one who is only dating you (sing.), and if you think so, that probably just means he’s good at hiding you (pl.) from each other.

It seems that the expectation of corruption was not limited to politics. For women, though, there was less pressure for return observation—a woman’s power lay instead in her ability to leave, thus relieving herself and simultaneously damaging the man’s honor. Regardless, young men would often brag about their multiple girlfriends. I knew an Egyptian working in Syria who assured me he had a girlfriend in Cairo, one in Alexandria, and one in Damascus. The men would flaunt their sexual prowess;

their girlfriends, on the other hand, would often be hurt by such cheating, hoping for (if not expecting) fidelity. Perhaps some of this philandering can be explained away by the Muslim tradition of polygamy. However, we again return to the proper form of morality—in practice, if not law, it is generally considered proper for a husband to inform his wives that he has more than one. The fact that dating men would keep the fact that he had multiple girlfriends secret *from them* violated this form.

Observation played a large role in dating. Both parties had to be aware that they were always being watched, and not just by each other. The neighbors would watch to see who came and went and would make their judgments. Friends in the street would report back to one of the couple what their partner was doing and with whom, sometimes as a warning and sometimes as a challenge, but either way serving to mind each other's *sharaf*. "Hassan, do you know that your girlfriend is out with another man? I saw them sitting in a café just now." To save face, the boyfriend would often reply, "What does he look like?... Yes, that's her brother—she was planning on meeting him for coffee this afternoon." Brother or not, the boyfriend now knew about a possibly offense to his *sharaf*. Women could be as equally involved in minding *sharaf*. For instance, I knew several Syrian girls living together. Each of them was attending Damascus University, but their families lived outside of Damascus and did not have relatives with whom they could live in the city. One girl, Khodoul, was dating a young man and another, Bushra, was friends with him (one of the few genuinely platonic relationships I was aware of). Unbeknownst to Khodoul, the boyfriend had asked Bushra to keep an eye on her and let him know if she got up to anything suspicious. The two girls were friends, but not close, and so Bushra agreed to do so, telling the boyfriend of Khodoul's comings and goings. While both of these examples involved the man being warned about possible threats to his *sharaf*, leaving the girlfriend out of the loop, women were just as likely to report *to* (rather than *on*) other women about the actions of their boyfriends, warning them of his being up to something.

The relationship between family members and dating could be complicated as well. Women did not trust men to be out with any other women aside from his close family members, and if they heard reports of him being seen with anyone else, they would instantly assume the worst. Men would occasionally entrust their girlfriends to

a brother or a close friend, if for example, they did not feel like dancing or going for coffee or if they had to travel. I had one female friend who had been dating a young man who was in Russia for a year of schooling. She enjoyed going out, but was never seen without her boyfriend's brother, who had been assigned and was trusted to keep an eye out for her. In a sense, it became as much as or more a test of the trust between the brothers as between her and the absent brother. Could and would the brother live up to his role as 'guardian' or would he become a threat? The rest of their circle of friends assumed the younger brother had moved fully into the older brother's place as boyfriend while the two kept up the charade, but no one ever spoke of it. In their eyes, *the boyfriend's* brother could never live up to the role of *her* brother as an appropriate guardian. The missing brother's *sharaf* was on the line, but there was nothing he could do about it from afar. Similarly, a German girlfriend of mine had clandestinely (i.e. her family and his brothers knew, but his parents did not) married a Syrian man and there was a running game where the husband insisted that his flirtatious brother remain 20 meters from her at all times. It was only half a joke.

Best Friends and Girlfriends

The ambiguous nature of trust was also visible in the ways that people narrated their conceptualizations of friendship. One of my networks included a group of young men and women, mostly university students about my own age. The group had initially been centered around a group of five young men who had met about seven years previously. From there, brothers, girlfriends, other male and female friends, and the occasional foreigner were incorporated into the greater group, but this core of five remained the same (see Table 1). Four were Syrian, the fifth had been born in Syria, but was raised in Jordan and had returned to Damascus for study. All were roughly middle class, and most were born Muslim (one was Shi'a), though they varied in degrees of practicing religion to the point where one claimed to be an atheist. They were very tight knit; "we used to spend every day in the summer together, every day." When I was first introduced to one of these core whom I had not known, my friend introduced him as "my best friend [in English]...he is *ibn 'ammi* (my father's brother's son)." It was a metaphor, for none of the five were related by blood, but one that was indicative of a strong bond. He considered all four of the others to be his

‘cousins’ as well, he said, and called them by the honor-laden term of ‘traveling friends’ (*rifqātt al-safar*).¹⁴² The friends were so close that they had narratively passed from the realm of friendship into that of family, with all the love, respect, responsibility, obligation, quarrels and sometimes competition that kinship might imply. By the time I arrived, two had moved to Spain for further education and to escape military service.¹⁴³ Two more were making preparations to also go to Spain and both left shortly after I concluded my fieldwork. The fifth was somewhat older than the rest and was married with a job and so watched his younger friends go. But it was, apparently this last’s recent marriage that changed the group dynamic, as he became more prone to staying at home than going out with his friends once he was wed.

As of 2005	Yassar	Samir	Fakhir	Khaled	Basil
Age	28	24	24	24	24
Married	Yes	No	No	No	Yes, in Spain
Religion	Sunni	Sunni	Atheist	Sunni	Shi’a
Ethnic Background	Arabic	Kurdish	Kurdish	Arabic	Arabic
Economic Status	Middle Class	Middle Class	Upper Middle Class	Middle Class	Lower Middle Class
Residence	Damascus	Damascus	Damascus/ Amman	Spain	Spain
Education	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters

Table 1: Description of friend circle

As far as trust goes, they trusted each other with their very lives. Samir asserted to me that there was no one he trusted more than this group—they were always welcome in each other’s homes and they would do anything to help each other. For instance, when Yassar heard that I (initially a friend of Samir’s) was

¹⁴² I did not initially understand this phrase, but discovered that traveling companions are (morally) considered, like host and guest, to be intricately bound up in each other’s honor, in terms of affection, protection and vengeance, if necessary (see Dresch 1989:59-61), though the relations between them were symmetrical (as fellow travelers) rather than asymmetrical (as between escort and traveler). Dresch (1989:65) describes such a set of relations as being potentially volatile and can “readily collapse into the defense of each individual’s honor,” a possibility that, as we shall see, was realized.

¹⁴³ Such a flight was something that all agreed was worthwhile. Of the three remaining in Syria, the oldest had already completed his service, one was an only son and so exempt, and the third was making plans to follow his friends to Spain.

looking for work, he offered to pull some strings (i.e. activate his *wasta*) to get me a job at his workplace. He knew nothing about who I was; it was a favor for Samir, not me. There were, to be sure, occasional arguments and fights between the friends, but they always settled. They had even shared girlfriends in the past—when one was bored with a girl, he would pass her on. Or so they flippantly declared.

But one evening, a scandal broke out. Samir had been dating Hiba for some months and appeared to actually be serious about their relationship (i.e. it was generally believed that he was not dating anyone else). However, as Hiba later related to me, Basil's younger brother had been speculating (out loud) that Fakhir was being somewhat more friendly with Hiba than was acceptable. Fakhir denied any such thing, and Samir sided with his friend, instead accusing the younger brother of being a liar (*kizāb*). In doing so, he served to narratively disconnect the younger brother, inverting the attack on his own *sharaf* by challenging the brother's honor. Hiba said that he reacted like that because he believed and trusted his friend. However, some weeks later, she told me that Samir had begun subtly warning her away from Fakhir, saying that he was the kind of person that used people, that he did not have any real friends, just people to drink with. Samir had even gone as far as saying that he did not particularly trust or even like his so-called friend, or any of the friends in the group. But this sentiment was in contrast to his actions earlier in their relationship, where, when he had had to go to work, he had entrusted her to Fakhir's care so she could stay on with us in the café. After the rumors, Fakhir had begun to talk to Hiba in a similar fashion, saying that Samir was his friend but was a boy (*walad*) who had not grown up. It was as if once the suspicion of Basil's brother came to light, the secret of the illicit act came to light and was thus created as real, despite it not having happened (yet).¹⁴⁴ The challenge was on. In a conversation I had with Fakhir at about this time, he too said that he did not have any "real" friends, even or especially amongst the group. No of them really knew him.¹⁴⁵ To no one's surprise except mine, Fakhir did ultimately try to seduce Hiba away from Samir, even asking her to marry him, and she was temporarily swayed though declined the marriage offer (according to her at least—Fakhir insisted that nothing of the sort had

¹⁴⁴ For "what breaks *sharaf*...is said to be calumny or gossip" (Dresch 1989:55).

¹⁴⁵ Gilsenan (1976:206) notes a similar use of this kind of declaration in Lebanon, where men spoke of the "secret selves" whose true lives no one could or would understand.

ever happened). Samir's trust in both was shattered, but contrary to his original declarations of brotherhood and fast friendship with Fakhir, he chose to openly challenge Fakhir's word and returned to Hiba. The two friends did not speak for months, and a year later, their friendship had not yet returned to the full camaraderie it had once possessed.

There were also instances in the group where members acted in ways that denied or defied the trust that one might have in another, most commonly in the revealing of another's secrets. Yassar, for instance, quite openly frowned on the whole situation with Hiba, disapproving of the immoral overtones of the relationships. However, Fakhir later told me that Yassar had no right to play the high-and-mighty moralizer, because he had secretly gone off and married another woman without telling his family or his first wife.¹⁴⁶ Fakhir was the only one who knew, as Yassar wanted to keep the secret close for fear of his parents and wife condemning the second wife and himself.¹⁴⁷ However, Fakhir was quite willing to tell me. Some months later, I heard other friends telling the 'secret' story, but by that time, Yassar had already been pressured by his family and his first wife into divorcing the second woman. Other secrets passed through the group just as easily, with the spreading of "secret" knowledge flowing like an undercurrent under the overt insistence of closeness and love. To follow the metaphor, rip tides are dangerous, but are no less a part of oceanic processes than the waves flowing towards shore. The passing of dangerous secrets was perhaps as much a part of creating and maintaining the circle of friendship as the faith and camaraderie. The connections and disconnections were part of the same process. Gluckman (1963:308) suggests that "talking about one another [is] what help[s] maintain people as a group." He argues that only members of a group have the "right to gossip" about the other members, and by participating in the gossip, one asserts one's desire to remain an active member of the group. 'Outsiders' are not permitted to speak ill of the group,

¹⁴⁶ The two acts were not exactly commensurate, as one involved secretly doing something that was technically legal and within the moral code (if not the general habitus), while the other involved challenging the *sharaf* of a close friend through the seduction of his girlfriend. Fakhir was not so much equating the two as challenging Yassar's absolute moral superiority in condemning Fakhir's actions.

¹⁴⁷ Having multiple wives is very rare in Syria, especially in Damascus. I only heard of three cases of Syrians having multiple wives. One was a man in his 70's, initially from the countryside (*rīf*), the time and location making it more socially acceptable. The other two were younger men, and both instances caused a great deal of family scandal when they came to light.

but ‘insiders’ are. This would not be surprising for my informants, who all expected the negative undercurrents (i.e. the spreading of secrets). If one wanted to really keep something secret, one did not tell anyone. Once revealed, one could *trust* that the word would spread by one’s friends.

The disconnections of the group did not stop at *sharaf*-challenging or secret-telling. There were also feelings of jealousy towards those of the group (particularly Fakhir) who were slightly wealthier than the rest (as there was a quiet jealousy of most people in society who had money). And while there was some degree of generosity and guesting, each was always aware of the financial indebtedness they either had or were owed. Members of the group would borrow and lend money as needed (though there was a distinct hierarchy here unlike with *wasta*’), adding occasional and temporary patron-client type relationships to the friendship. This could lead to bitterness if not repaid. For instance, Khaled and Fakhir were on barely-civil terms due to some incident a year or so before I met them regarding large amounts of money, with one claiming it had been repaid and the other insisting it had not. Despite all this, however, the circle of friends remained very close. When one came into town, they would all gather and be inseparable for days on end. Basil returned from Spain at one point with his new (Peruvian-American) wife, and the other three of the group in town got together and celebrated the newlyweds with no end of enthusiasm (if not in quite the “traditional” manner)—including Fakhir and Samir working and later dancing together. They fondly recalled their years spent together in university and summers spent loafing around. They laughed and joked and teased and visited and talked together. I have disproportionately represented here the negative aspects of their friendship, but that is intentional, as it is easy to assume the positive aspect of friendship relations. But for all the ways in which these ‘good’ qualities were enacted, there were as many ruptures as bonds. In the same vein, though, they were no less (and perhaps more) good friends for their difficulties.

Here we see another instance of the shifting nature of relations, how both connections and disconnections contribute to the making of a relationship and the ordering of the people in one’s world. The members of this friendship circle were on the closest of terms, but still there was a constant challenging of each other, of stepping into someone else’s territory or relating that which should be kept hidden.

The status of the relations between them was constantly in flux, being rearranged and repositioned through dialogue and action. If the relations themselves were in constant motion, it is no wonder, then, that the ways in which people describe them also were. As I suggested in the introduction, ambiguity becomes not so much a blurry grey area, but a way of traversing between white and black areas—i.e. the positive and negative aspects of doing relations (c.f. Briggs 1998: Chapter 3 for a similar use of ambiguity). “Trust” between friends became the way in which they framed this motion; they discussed the degrees of trust, different varieties of trust (e.g. I trust you with my secrets, but not my girlfriend), and even when distrust might be more appropriate than trust.

What these examples also point to is that even within bonds of close friendship, there are spaces and moments of ‘suspicion’ (perhaps not dissimilar to the spaces of suspicion that pepper narrations of regime processes). Or, as in the several examples cited above, I would say that my informants’ attitudes involved less suspicion than the expectation of the immoral act, an expectation that was revealed to be sensible every time trust was betrayed. This is most visible in the whispers that initially spread about Hiba and Fakhir. It was irrelevant what either party said or whether or not there was “proof,” because it was generally *known* that something had happened. The more Hiba, Fakhir or even Samir insisted that there was nothing, the more the other members of the group were convinced that they were hiding something. Here then, there was no ambiguity on the part of the observers as to what was (not) observed; they knew what had happened, which gave them a certain moral superiority, temporarily rearranging the structure of the group. Fakhir, specifically, reacted to this repositioning by ‘exposing’ another member of the group (Yassar and his multiple wives), reasserting some sort of moral equality. And Samir, whose *sharaf* had been tested by his rumored inability to protect his female from another male, attempted to redress this imbalance by confronting those doing the talking. The knowledge that people had (or generated) of the situations was used to manipulate the group dynamic, to place and reposition different members in relation to each other. My informants were aware of the constant motion between themselves and described it vis-à-vis their shifting narrations. They knew that trust and distrust were equally a part of the doing of friendship relations.

Suspecting Kin

This tendency to assume and act as if an immoral act had occurred is not limited to friendship circles, but also was a regular feature in the ways people narrated and ‘did’ kinship. I encountered numerous moments where family members would relate various suspicions about the things that their kin were involved in. As in the above example, such knowledge of the immoral allowed family to negotiate the relations between them. Many such narrations also revolved around inappropriate sex acts, but not all of them. Below I trace out two such instances of the assumption of the immoral and how they were involved in some rather dramatic rearrangements of kinship dynamics for the families involved. In both cases, however, we again find moments of duplexity, where both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects of kinship become visible in their narrations.

Salah and Fatima

Marital ‘Humor’

Salah and Fatima had been married for several months when I met them. Salah was in his mid-thirties and Fatima would soon be 20. Lower middle class and of Kurdish descent (as was she), he owned a small bird shop and the two lived in a small apartment above his parents’ house. The marriage was arranged by their mothers, after Salah’s mother had seen Fatima at a wedding and thought her appropriately modest. Fatima had just recently discovered that she was pregnant when I met them. Fatima was quiet; the family had initially thought her to be extremely shy and modest, but after several months, she still did not say more than two or three words in an evening, despite continual coaxing on the part of Salah’s younger, unmarried sister. One night, Salah’s father commented on how quiet she was and Salah snidely remarked that it did not matter if she was present or absent—the amount of conversation you got out of her was the same. The two younger siblings confided to

me that they had begun to realize that she was really just ‘stupid’ (*ghabīya*) and had no personality (“*ma ʿandha shakhsīya*”).

I knew the family because I was dating Salah’s younger brother and they had welcomed me as an effective daughter-in-law. I spent a great deal of time at their house, just as frequently sitting with his sister and mother as my boyfriend himself. There were no doubts as to my being with the second son, but there was constant joking as to which male in the household I would marry; the pool included the older sister’s husband, several uncles, and even the father once in a while. However, as I noted in Chapter 4, this marriage humor was common whenever I met the parents of my friends. When I went to my boyfriend’s uncle’s wedding, there was a game to see which male (married or not) could manage to win me away from him, all in good fun and laughter. A resource (e.g. a female) placed amongst men could become an opportunity for challenges and competition. Even the father, normally reserved, joined in, offering to pay off my student loans so I could stay in Syria and marry his son. “Either one, really, or if you don’t like them, we can bring in someone else for you,” he said to me as his youngest daughter watched with a pretend-shocked expression.

One evening as the entire family was sitting around, the father came out with another line. Salah and I were on polite terms, but rarely spoke more than to say hello. However, in a light-hearted moment, his father turned to Salah and said, “You know, my son, you really shouldn’t bring your girlfriends home when your wife [who was present] is around. Kathleen, you should come to the shop tomorrow instead, that would be more appropriate.” The entire family erupted into laughter, including Fatima, at both the silliness of the idea itself and the fact that it was the father saying it.

A couple of months later, the marriage began to get rocky. Fatima threatened to leave a number of times, and did so once or twice, though usually returned. Finally she left for good, going to her parents’ house and talk of divorce started soon after, despite the pregnancy. The family would sit up long hours discussing divorce processes and who Salah should marry next, much to his chagrin. It came out shortly after that Salah had been engaged previously. It had been an arrangement of love and, Salah’s younger sister told me, he was still in love with that girl. Something had gone

sour between the two, though, and it had been called off. To prove that he was no longer attached, he decided to quickly marry someone else (which, his sister said, only proved that he was *not* in fact over her). Within a month, his mother had found Fatima and they were married shortly after. “So,” his sister told me, “that’s the real problem with their relationship. He’s not over our the other girl and Fatima was just a substitute. Of course they’re not happy together. He should just apologize and get the first one back.” But the general consensus was somewhat more varied, especially with the issue of a child. Everyone agreed, though, that Fatima was silly to have left, because Salah was known for his generosity, for his willingness to give without ever asking for anything in return. The girl was considered a fool for having given that up. Salah’s mother went and tried to talk to Fatima’s mother to see if anything could be resolved, but it ended in an exchange of insults.

One evening, while everyone was gathered to talk, including the older, married sister and her family, Salah said that he had been to see Fatima and they had talked. She had not returned with him, but had explained for the first time why she was upset. Most of the complaints were about her feeling out of place and far from home. But, as he turned to look at me with wide eyes, she had apparently been mostly upset that he had been so bold and disrespectful as to bring his mistress to the house while she was there! Everyone went silent for a moment as they tried to figure out what he was saying and then burst into uproarious laughter as they realized that he meant the father’s joking from some months ago. No one could believe that she had taken that seriously. However, from her perspective, she had observed the signs of an illicit sexual relationship. And not only that, but it had been flaunted in front of her face. While the rest of us took it as a joke, she saw through the humor to the issue underneath. Given the joking about marriage as well, especially the occasional comments about me marrying Salah, it is no small wonder that a new wife would feel threatened.

Challenging the Family

Once again, we see a moment where humor works as a space for testing, for challenging a character and a connection—a challenge that ultimately served to

distance Fatima from her husband and his family. The joking was a ‘light’ and seemingly harmless way to confront what could not be openly addressed, i.e. the illicit sex act that existed as a potential connection between Salah and myself. Any such act would have, of course, been concealed by us as conspirators and had this joke revealed the existence of such an act, it is likely that I would have been the one distanced from the family, having so damaged my boyfriend’s *sharaf* (at the hands of his brother, no less; see below). And the secrecy of the potential affair again made it all that much more aesthetically immoral. As I said, there had been another instance where the father somewhat jokingly suggested that I could marry his older son, but that suggestion that I marry Salah was much less immoral than a potential affair precisely because it was made in the open. It followed the proper forms. However, what the joke suggested was that there was some sort of relationship occurring that did *not* adhere to those forms. The moment of the joke had been precarious for all four of us involved (Salah, Fatima, my boyfriend and myself), as it held the possibility of being a moment of revelation. As my boyfriend was fond of telling me, “people are always watching,” and his family tended to observe me quite closely, weighing me up as a future daughter-in-law. Had either Salah or I reacted in a suspicious way (looking nervous, frowning instead of laughing, exchanging glances, etc.), what had started as a joke might have turned into a cause for worry. Everyone except Fatima had, of course, ‘known’ it was a joke, but the undercurrent of suspicion, a knowledge of the immoral, was just as known. The joke tested that knowledge in a quiet way, creating a challenge to all of our relationships that needed to be delicately answered. Surprised laughter was apparently the proper response, alleviating worries that the potential relationship between Salah and myself had ever been realized. Except, of course, for Fatima.

What this joking about the immoral served to do was momentarily upend the social dynamics of the family group vis-à-vis its challenge. Because I was a participant in the joke itself and the enjoyment of it afterward (by laughing appreciatively), I was included within the family circle, marked as someone who could take a joke and return them in other moments. Still, it made me aware of the potential for people to misinterpret any communication I had with Salah, so I was always conscious of maintaining a proper distance from him. Fatima was excluded

both from and by the joke. She did not laugh, only smiled when the father made his comment, and left for bed not long after. Her very absence in the joke quietly made her out to be the fool of the whole affair. Here was her husband's mistress sitting right in front of her, and she did not suspect a thing! She was also portrayed as ineffective, having no power to scold or berate her husband for his ill-behavior. I cannot help but think that the best response she could have given would have been to exaggeratedly begin yelling at her husband. (There were similar jokes made about Salah's sister's husband and myself, to which her response was usually to begin playfully beating her husband about the head or offering to sell him to me.) In merely smiling and accepting the joke, Fatima was recreated in a submissive daughter-/sister-in law position. In contrast, I would regularly be included in family business and be asked for advice or input. They commented on how much more engaging I was than her, making specific comparisons. In the joke, I even co-opted her place as a wife. The joke, which was as much act as words, had such a strong impact on Fatima's knowledge of the family's social relations that she turned a momentary narrative shift into a much more permanent arrangement of relations.

The case of Fatima's improper reaction was oddly relieving for an anthropologist enmeshed in the complexities of playful, but very real challenges. Gilsenan (1996) describes how humor can be used to alter and rearrange social patterns and that there are some people who are less than adept in this play that is not all in fun. Fatima was somewhat socially inept, taking as serious what was revealed not to be, and reacting both at the time and afterwards in precisely the wrong manner. She had not properly 'read' the situation and by proving herself incapable of sharing in the same social code as the rest of the family, was distanced from all those who did understand it correctly.

At the same time, the joke revealed other tensions. Fatima was not the only one who did not react quite as light-heartedly to the joke as the rest of the family. My boyfriend had laughed lightly and grinned, but then got somewhat pensive and shortly thereafter offered to drive me home. The comments pointed not only to the problems of a marriage, but also to those surrounding brothers. My boyfriend was as much at the heart of the joke as Fatima, because of the implication of his inability to protect his girlfriend from his brother. The joke was also a test of his *sharaf* and his

ability to maintain it in the face of what might be the ultimate threat of his older brother. But, as in the friendship example, this highlights that when it comes to women (and the associated enactment of male honor via her modesty and safekeeping), brothers especially are outside a certain circle of trust. They both help someone to maintain his *sharaf* and simultaneously test it. In fact, the testing may well be part of helping him to maintain it, giving him the opportunity to appropriately defend his honor and to reveal where any ruptures in his *sharaf* might lie—a thought that speaks volumes when considering the way that politics, too, is ‘done.’

Joseph (1994) describes similar tensions that exist alongside with love in Lebanese families and are played out in the course of sibling relationships. She focuses on the positive and negative psychodynamic processes of brothers and sisters, but in doing so explains how brothers will sometimes control their sisters, mothers, and younger brothers and how this can challenge the father’s authority. She argues that a brother “learn[s] to become a patriarch by becoming the man of the house in relation to his sister, mother, and younger siblings” (1994:52), through both love and power/violence. Central to this is what she calls “connectivity,” meaning “psychodynamic processes by which one person comes to see him/herself as part of another. Boundaries between the persons are relatively fluid so that each needs the other to complete the sense of selfhood” (1994:55). Though the situation with my boyfriend’s family was not centered around brother/sister pairs, it reveals similar sorts of power tensions that coincide, and are indeed required along with, love and solidarity in the formation of both individual and familial identity.

But in the end, it was revealed (to me) that I was not the problem, but rather another female whom Salah desired. Thus the theme of the joke, if not the details, proved more accurate than I might have initially guessed. Salah’s younger sister later reported to me that Salah and Fatima got back together right before their child was born. She had moved back in and the arrival of their baby helped to smooth out some of the tensions between them. But six months after that, she left again and had still not returned to her husband’s home when I visited a year on from the initial separation. But they were not yet divorced either.

Rami, Issam, (George?), and their Father (Abu Issam)

Not all such ‘suspicions of the immoral’ and tests of morality are centered around male-female sexuality. The story of the brothers Rami, Issam, (their absent brother) George, and their father (Abu Issam) provides one example where a suspicious incident in the past was narrated to be the cause of a long-term familial rearrangement, as well as opening up other experiences of the “dark side” of kinship. The shifting nature of relations here is revealed not only through multiple dis/connections of a single narration, but also through the presence of two competing narrations about the situation. But while in the last example, all of the major events took place over the course of a year and I was able to witness both the initial joke and the reactions to it, the following example stretches back almost 20 years. By the time I met the subjects of the story, they had achieved a degree of balance and acceptance with each other. However it was a delicate one, and sometimes no more than a veneer, quietly shifting one way or the other through the course of their everyday interactions.

Abu Issam (whose son we met in the section on the gold trade, Chapter 4) was born into a family with very little money. He had discovered that he had a delicate hand and an innate ability to work gold. He began by making molds for children’s earrings and with time began to earn some money. As soon as he could, he bought a gold shop and went into retail, as selling gold jewelry to customers was more profitable than making it. His shop was in the gold suq of the Old City and soon grew to a respectable size. His sons worked in the shop along with him as soon as they were able, learning the trade in case they chose to take it up. A few years before I arrived in Damascus, Abu Issam’s wife had died, and in his grief he had closed the shop. His son Issam, who had returned from America for his mother’s funeral, decided to remain in Syria and re-open the shop for his father. When I met them, Abu Issam, nearly 70 years old, still owned the shop, but Issam was effectively in charge of the day-to-day running of it. His younger brother Rami was also working in the shop, and the two devoted their time and energy to keeping it running smoothly. Abu Issam would usually stop by once a day for about half an hour to check on things, much to the annoyance of his sons who saw him as interfering just for the sake of interfering. They would frequently complain about these visits while

he was in the shop, switching to English (which Issam was fluent in and Rami had a working knowledge of) so he would not understand. Complaints notwithstanding, the atmosphere in the shop was usually jovial with much friendly joking and laughter between the family members.

The family was doing well for itself when I met them, but the distribution of wealth was somewhat uneven. Issam lived with his father—they owned two houses and each had their own car. Issam was not married at the time, though he had been married and divorced while in the U.S. (with no children). Rami was married with two children, and a third was born shortly after I left Damascus. He lived in a house that had once belonged to his mother in one of the growing suburbs outside the city. His family did not have a car, and his income was less than that of his father or brother as he worked fewer hours and was relatively less involved in the business. They also had a brother (George) whom I never met, but featured prominently in the stories presented here, and an older married sister whom I met a number of times. The family generally got along well, often meeting up on holidays and weekends to go out for a meal or just to visit. Like many other gold shop owners, they were Christians.

The Brothers' Narration

One afternoon sitting at the gold shop, I saw Rami very agitated for the first time, as he was normally a light-hearted, charismatic man. He and Issam were talking about money and Rami was upset because he felt he was not earning enough. He said (half for my benefit and half for Issam's) that he was only taking home 5000 lira a week (\$100), which only amounted to about 10% of the profits of the shop; in fact, he was not even paid in a percentage of the takings, but at a flat rate which often left him earning less than if he were making a percentage. He said this was not fair, as their father took half of the profits and Issam the remainder. So Issam, despite not having a family to raise, was making roughly four times as much as Rami, and their father, who had no one but himself to care for, made five times as much. 5000 lira a week was not, Rami felt, sufficient to raise a family on. He could not afford a car even if he

wanted one,¹⁴⁸ and the only reason he could afford his house was because it was already paid for. Issam replied by reminding Rami that his weekly wages had increased from 3500 to 5000 lira in the past year and a half, which was a tremendous improvement. He also said to me as an aside that “we let him live in the house for free.” Rami overheard this and said that was part of the problem—they could make him begin paying rent at any time and then he would be in real trouble. “The problem, though,” Rami said, “is not with Issam, it’s with our father.” The two then began to tell the story from the beginning, Rami doing so in a bitter and angry tone:

When Issam finished high school, their father had funded him to go study and work as an engineer in America, money that, Issam said, he paid back as soon as he was able. While Issam was gone, Rami spent the next 16 years working at the shop, because without at least one of the sons around, Abu Issam would not have been able to run it. As a result, he had to drop out of high school and had never gotten the opportunity to go to college, while *his* hard work allowed his brother to do so. All of his other options for life had been ruled out because he had had to devote his life to the shop. He had put up with 16 years of their imposing and controlling father and his moods. Then their mother had died and Issam came home, and when it was time to open up the shop, everything (including the best portion of the profits) went to the golden child. Issam said maybe the fault was not only their father’s. Their youngest brother George had, when they were younger and Issam was gone, been taking some money from the shop, and to this day was not allowed back in. The problem for Rami was that when he was young, he had liked living the high life, or the appearance of it, and one day his father had seen him and some girl driving around in a rented Mercedes. His father instantly assumed that Rami too had been stealing, if he was able to afford things like that. In the end, it turned out that the girl was actually the one who had rented it, and Rami had brought a receipt from the rental company to prove it, but the damage was already done. The immoral act (theft) had occurred. Abu Issam knew what he knew—by giving cause for suspicion the son was already guilty in his father’s eyes (similar to the way a woman seen in the streets with a man would be enough to make all the onlookers certain that there *was* an illicit sexual relationship between them). The result was a massive rift between father and son. It was George’s initial act that set the idea for suspicion into Abu Issam’s head, but it ultimately affected both sons (as we saw with the circle of friends—the wisdom of being suspicious is enhanced when trust is betrayed).

Issam, in contrast, had proved his financial trustworthiness by paying back the large sum of money that his father had lent him to study abroad. Given the constant fluctuations of the exact contents of the gold shop, Issam

¹⁴⁸ At a rough estimate, it would cost a minimum of 1.5 million Syrian lira to buy a car and pay for the necessary taxes. At this wage, if Rami were able to save literally ever lira he earned, buying no food, not paying for electricity or water, etc., it would still take roughly six years before he could afford one.

said that their father could never be entirely sure as to what he had or did not have. This meant that it required a great deal of trust in those you have handling your gold, be they sons or otherwise. In the end, while Issam effectively ran the shop, it remained their father's business and Issam had to abide by his wishes. Abu Issam only just trusted Rami to work in the shop (and never without Issam also present) and so, *he* insisted that Rami's wages remained low. George was still not allowed to even enter the shop. Issam shrugged as if to say it was out of his hands, but it was clear that he sympathized with his brother, though not enough to pay him more than he was told. There was an almost ominous lack of an "I would pay you more if I could" statement from Issam (not unlike the lack of a "We could do better" refrain in politics). Despite this, it was clear from both men's contributions to the story that their father (with some help from their brother George) was to blame for Rami's financial situation.

When the two brothers were jointly narrating the story, Abu Issam and George became the external figures, the ones responsible for difficulties. The two brothers were (somewhat) united in the joint exclusion of their father. But he was not represented as a wholly unreasonable man, for at the heart of his mistrust was the suspicion of an act of stealing. Rami, in his retelling, insists that he never took anything, but that does not affect the *knowledge* that his father had, created through the connections he made between what he observed and his previous experience of a son's betrayal. George was the immoral figure, their father was the suspicious one, Rami was the victim, and Issam was just trying to do his best. Stealing was cast as an immoral act, one that was deemed rightly punishable by Abu Issam's forbidding of his youngest son from entering the shop again—that decision was never contested. This suspicion of the immoral act and the decrying of stealing as immoral were similar to those repeated in narrations of the regime. But here, they presented a moment where the otherwise binding aspects of kinship relations were strained and tested. With the suspected act, observed in Rami's riding in the expensive car, the patterns of kinship were altered. Rami was removed from being inside the boundaries of financial trust, reflected in the fact that he was no longer allowed to run the shop on his own or even take more than a negligible wage. This distancing placed a great deal of tension on Rami and his father's relationship. There was respect lost on both sides, and strain was placed on the other siblings to keep connections with each of them active without damaging ties with the other.

It also changed the nature of the father-son relationship somewhat, from that of a man teaching his son his trade to that of an employer and a barely-trusted employee.¹⁴⁹ Rami often described his father solely in terms of money (when the brothers narrated other stories about their father, it was usually Issam who did so). Issam remained the ‘good son,’ who was trusted financially and could thus occupy a space as both employee and son without much complication. He was also occasionally annoyed by his father, but it was much less than Rami’s outright anger because, ultimately, Issam took home only marginally less than their father. Rami was also much more prone to being criticized, for while Abu Issam would occasionally take him to task for sloppy work, he rarely did so with Issam. Rami’s relationship with his father had become much more ambiguous and he was unsure of how to navigate that. He was often cold when his father arrived and the two usually spoke little more than to exchange greetings. Rami would often take his lunch break when their father came in. Nor did he attend family gatherings as often as his siblings. In some ways, he became more like an employee than a son. But at the same time, such a degree of betrayal and emotion was only possible *because* Rami was family. He was shifted both inside and out. George, on the other hand, though still a son/brother, was moved the furthest outside, for his initial immoral act was seen to have the cause of the falling apart of the family.

The whole situation also placed Issam and Rami in an awkward relation, as Rami often did not know if he was to treat his brother as an older brother, who deserved familial respect and authority or as a manager who doled out wages at the boss’s command.¹⁵⁰ The two were normally quite friendly, but in moments such as these, the tension between them became visible. Issam’s silence when he could have assured his brother that he would have paid him more if he was able to do so hinted that his loyalties were split. While he would support his brother on an emotional level, on a financial level he seemed to be more devoted to his father’s wishes—he

¹⁴⁹ Compare this to the situation of Salah above, whose father officially put the title of the family shop in Salah’s name when his son began to work there the majority of the time. It was Salah then, and not his father, who owned the shop, reducing the possibility of such conflict.

¹⁵⁰ Earlier we saw how non-kin persons were narratively accorded a kin-like status, with friends being like cousins. It is rarer to see kin beginning to fall into the rubric of non-kin, but see Jean-Klein (2003). Rothenberg (2004:Chapter 4) also points to situations where kin become like non-kin and vice versa, but relates it to proximity in space (what she calls ‘social geography’), where Palestinian families who were distant from each other and less able to regularly activate their relations were often more like strangers than neighbors who lived nearby.

too shifted inside and outside the two other men's realms. Perhaps the most painful moment of the entire narration was when, to try and calm the enraged Rami, Issam said that he and their father would never let Rami and his family starve—the same sort of assurances a client has in a patron-client relationship. He assured his younger brother that they would take care of him in case of any emergencies. Such a comment was particularly poignant given that Rami had been in a car accident in a taxi earlier in the year and had needed a good deal of money for the doctor and physical therapy. While the comment was intended to make Rami feel better, it had the opposite effect. It is something one would say to an employee rather than a brother. He sat down, crestfallen, having been openly stripped of autonomy and dignity, effectively reduced to a nearly-dependent status.

Rami's Version

Later that same afternoon, Rami and I walked to an internet café. He was still upset from the afternoon's discussion and as we talked he told me another version of the same story I had just heard, a version he was able to tell only when his father *and* brother were not present.

Many years ago, their father had sent Issam to the U.S. to study, work, make money, and generally get all the best opportunities. Rami had also wanted to go, but his father had urged him to stay, promising to give him a house and work if he wanted it. So Rami stayed behind and, after completing his military service, was made responsible for running the shop for 16 years. He got married and started his own family, but had to sacrifice other opportunities, like those his brother was reveling in. Then there was the incident with the rented car. He did not describe it in much detail, but his account placed it in a time when he was already married, giving a slightly different twist to the girlfriend aspect—especially as they were a Christian family and this was not acceptable as it would be under Islam. He admits that he was not morally spotless, but focused on the wrongful accusation, glossing over the lack of any accusation of the immorality of the girlfriend. After the fallout with his father, Rami found work elsewhere. And then Issam came back after their mother died and the gold shop had been closed. Eventually Issam decided he wanted to go back to the U.S. and their father only persuaded him to stay by asking him to reopen the shop—Issam and not Rami who had worked there and kept it going for so long. Initially the profits were distributed 50/50 between Issam and their father. Rami was then asked (by whom was unclear) and allowed to help out at the shop, but he did not like the idea of taking pittance. So he went to his father and said, "He's your

son, but so am I, so if we are all going to be a part of this instead of looking for other work, it should be 1/3 percent of the profits for each.” [This is where Rami’s version begins to differ from the combined one.] He said that his father agreed to this arrangement and told Issam of the plan. According to Rami, it was *Issam* and not their father, who said no, that it would remain 50/50 with Rami taking a much-reduced weekly salary. Issam was the villain, not their father. Rami said he was tired of living under the shadow of his brother, who always got the better opportunities and had reduced him to nothing in the one place that should have been his as he had kept the shop together for so long.

In Rami’s telling, the focus of the blame shifted from the father to the brother. The suspicious incident of the past was downplayed but kept continually unsettled—it had caused problems at the time, forcing him to search for work elsewhere, but it seemed in this narration that father and son had been reconciled in the end. The current frostiness between them was the result only of light frustration at Abu Issam’s constant checking up on his sons’ work, compounded by the fact that their father would not say anything to Issam to make him accept a three-way split. The relationship between Rami and his father was somewhat less ambiguous in this narration. They were much more firmly cemented in a father-son set of roles that was only temporarily altered by the suspicion of stealing. The suspicion had a great impact on their relations, but it was not as long term as the initial telling indicated.

The relationship that was revealed to be under greater strain was that between the two brothers. Rami’s version was full of bitterness and anger toward his older brother, beginning with jealousy over his brother’s opportunities to study and work abroad, while he was not even able to continue his education into university. Issam had been given the chance to prove himself financially by receiving a substantial loan from his father, where no similar loan or the chance to repay it had been forthcoming for Rami. This bitterness played out as a competition between the brothers, as seen from the younger (losing) brother’s perspective. The father and George were both underwritten characters in this narration.

Not only, then, does brotherhood contain the potential for competition for women, but also for a father’s affection, trust and financial support. This competition, a ‘negative’ but familiar aspect of kinship, impacts and reforms the interaction between siblings, especially in the case of two grown brothers who worked together for long hours every day and received regular visits from the figure

around whom they were competing. Such tension was compounded by the fact that one very clearly held superiority in the workplace, with the ability to tell his younger brother what to do as well determine how much money he would receive. In a gesture (apparently) of caring and responsibility, Issam assured Rami that he and his father would take care of Rami's family if necessary, but this only added salt to Rami's wounds. In the shop, when it came to matters of work, Rami was deferential to his brother, following his lead. Issam counted the money and made all the transactions, whereas Rami usually worked at cleaning the gold or resizing jewelry, a job that their sister's son would carry out when he came in to work (as an apprentice, rather than someone long-familiar with the trade). Issam always carried the keys.

And yet, there were moments outside the running of the shop where Rami seemed to style himself as ahead of his brother. Rami was married and had children, he had worked in a variety of different jobs across Syria, and knew many people. But most of all, he was personable in a way his brother was not. It was a comparison they both often made—Issam had good financial sense, but Rami could get along with anyone. This slight shifting of moral “capital” (Bourdieu 1977), achieved through joking about their personality weaknesses, helped them to negotiate a common ground while at work by creating a more even space where they could be friendly. In this realm, Rami prevailed slightly, by virtue of having taken the step into the completion of life (i.e. starting a family), having acquired more *wasta*, and having earned the reputation of being the more generous of the two. (“He’s got a hole in his hand; he’s always giving away money to anyone who needs it.”)

But even these were only temporary shifts away from the more regular pattern of moral and financial authority, whereby Issam activated relationships as both as older brother and employer. Interestingly, this authority was reenacted in the ways in which the two discussed financial affairs in the shop. While Rami would only discuss his version of the story with me privately, Issam would discuss his angle, which apportioned some blame on Rami himself, in front of his younger brother. While we were all sitting together, Issam said to me (in front of Rami) that it was partially Rami's fault for his money problems. Rami, according to his brother, could not hold on to money, had never been able to. He would spend it on all sorts of things rather than saving it up. He had a hole in his pocket as well as his hand. Rami

nodded as his brother spoke. Issam and his father chose to pay Rami less so as to make sure he did not waste his money. Such a restriction *was* a form of care and responsibility, not dissimilar to the case described by Gilsenan (1996:308) where a Lebanese man felt he had been betrayed (“eaten”) by his family who had *not* properly restrained him and so let him squander his money. While Rami could only speak about his brother’s involvement in hushed tones, Issam could discuss his brother’s faults in front of the latter’s face. And Rami said nothing to contradict him, exemplifying the social dynamic between the two present and the two absent (the father and George) figures. There remained a tension between the brothers, influenced and affected in no small part by the competition for and the suspicion of their father. Kinship again revealed its competitive, angry, suspicious and bitter side.

Who Watches the Watchers?

Neighbors

Throughout all of these examples of kinship and friendship, I have highlighted the regularity of a suspicion/knowledge of the immoral act and the ways in which this knowledge can impact the relations and dynamics between groups of people. This approach to the world, one that regularly includes suspicion, is not limited to political or economic ‘conspiracy theories,’ but is also present in and informs the ways that people conduct their own lives. But what is central to such an approach to life is that there is someone watching, there is an observer who is both within and outside the situation at hand. These observers enact a somewhat ambiguous role, for they are involved and uninvolved, passive and active. They need to be close enough to the situation for it to be of interest and yet distant enough so as not to be actively involved themselves (otherwise they become part of the narration rather than a commentator on it). Their role is a passive one in that they are merely watching, but it is also active as they analyze situations and then generate and distribute the results of their analysis, taking a certain risk in the process. They are not-so silent and not-so hidden watchers, and perhaps we might be inclined to label them as gossip-mongers. Gossip surely plays a part, but what I might argue is different in this case is the level of reflexivity on the parts of both observer and observed. One informant told me that

“People here see and notice and talk about everything.” The watched know that they are being watched. And the watchers know that they too are under constant observation. The process of observation involves the analysis of situations both visible and not, and perhaps more importantly, involves the passing on of knowledge and not mere rumor—a knowledge that is tested and created as it related. Even rumor has its place, though, as it can be used (like joking) as a means of moving a potential relationship from the realm of suspicion to that of the known. And given that everyone knows the how the processes of observation, suspicion, and suspicion-testing work, the fact that people would conspire to keep some relation or incident from view, would seem to indicate that they know what they are doing is immoral. Invisible acts are dangerous and immoral, but even the visible (if not ‘public’) is not always problem-free arena, for what is observed can contain indications of a further immoral relationship behind it. Only when a thing is openly tested can the suspicion of the immoral be quieted, and not always then.

But who is doing the watching? The easy answer is that everyone is always watching. One watches oneself, one’s family, friends, associates, friends’ friends, neighbors, and anyone else who might be of the slightest relevance or relation. When the situation calls for it (e.g. if a person sees his friend’s girlfriend out with another man), one might report back to the more directly interested parties (unless, of course, one has one’s own suspicious reasons for not doing so). We have seen how this works in some situations between kin, but I have so far left out the presence of neighbors and their involvement in the generation of knowledge of the immoral. Outside of the immediate family, neighbors are probably the best-informed as to the comings and goings of one’s life. Neighbors live in close proximity and, given the very tight arrangement of houses and apartments, are often within easy seeing and hearing distance.

In vom Bruck’s (1997) work on Yemen, she details how the spheres of ‘public’ and ‘private’ are not always readily distinguishable. She notes how, in some ethnographic instances, the seemingly ‘private’ space of the house can become a public one, or in some cases a visible one. She describes how Yemeni women would often cover themselves while hanging up their laundry on their own roofs because they were visible to the seeing eyes of neighbors (1997:148). Neighbors, much like

kin or friends, monitor each other's honor and are involved in the creation (or destruction) of personal and familial reputations. Though non-kin neighbors might not as 'inside' as family members, they are still a presence to be constantly aware of, especially in a situation where anyone could be a member of the *mukhabarāt*.

However, there is a degree of anonymity to be found in a city of several million people that might not be present in a smaller village or town. One's neighbors might be able to observe one's actions while at home, but with the growing use of cars, the limits of where one might go to work or socialize are greatly expanded (see Introduction). Even for families without cars, taxis and buses provide a way to traverse the wide geographical space of the city. The people one socializes with are not contained within a bounded area, so that evening gatherings could take place well outside one's community. Going to a restaurant or café, one would likely not know the other customers. People's work would often be quite a distance from their homes, especially those working in ministries, schools or hospitals with a centralized set of buildings. Even self-employed people usually had to travel away from their neighborhoods to their shops that would be more centrally-located in the city. Just going shopping would take people far from home to large, impersonal complexes of shops in the center of town.

But I was told that the city was not always so impersonal. One upper middle class informant spoke of his childhood in Damascus, reminiscing on how he could go walking in the streets, even in the New City, and know everyone he passed. And he would go to restaurants and know the other customers, "This table was the Azem's, that table as the Halabi's, etc." And while watching a *muselsel* (mini-series) that depicted Damascus at the end of the 19th century, another informant told me that everyone used to be very sociable with their neighbors. And not just the people living immediately around them, but the whole area. If there was a party, everyone would be invited, or those with money would at least send food out into the streets so that even the poorer members of the neighborhood could share in the festivities. There was a responsibility to take care of each other. She said that things were different now; people sometimes do not even know who their neighbors were—she herself did not. That kind of closeness, she told me, was possible when there were only

thousands of people in the city, but with the millions of people in Damascus now, it was impossible.

And yet, despite that distance, she was always intimately aware of what was going on in the home below her. She discussed the scandal of a father who beat his children, noted how the foreign daughter-in-law would frequently not eat dinner with the rest of the family, how there was always arguing and screaming, and so on. She did not know them by name, but had a knowledge of them nevertheless, based on what she had observed. And one evening after she had told me this, I was over visiting and there was a knock on the door. It turned out to be the mother and her daughter-in-law who lived downstairs. They had locked themselves out of their house. My friend welcomed them in and offered them some food, showing clearly that there was still some form of social obligation and responsibility between neighbors, even in a big, cold city. In fact, the city sometimes even provided for better opportunities to observe one's neighbors. While Old City homes mostly had inward-facing courtyards, apartments in the New City usually reversed this and had balconies that overlooked the streets. On warm evenings, many balconies would be occupied (especially if they were on busy streets) with family members having tea or coffee and watching the comings and goings of passers-by. Perhaps such observation was a way to pass the time or to make sure that one's neighborhood was a safe and calm place, but I would argue that it was *also* a way in which Damascenes (Syrians, Arabs, etc.) engaged in their social surroundings. Observation and analysis of what had been observed were not so much activities one did as methods of interacting with and generating knowledge about the world. Between distant neighbors it might not have much effect on their relations, but the knowledge was being produced anyhow.

Salah's married sister (as we were discussing the possibility of divorce):
Maybe we should lower our voices so the whole neighborhood won't hear what we're talking about.

Salah: And what would they do if they did hear?

Salah's sister: Just talk, but still...

People were concerned about what neighbors might think and say, and there was really no such thing as 'just' talk.

Close Neighbors

Where Neighbors and Kin Meet

However, neighbors were not always strangers to each other. Though it was becoming ever more difficult in a climate of climbing housing costs, extended families often tried to live in relatively close areas of a neighborhood (Jean-Klein 2003). This residence pattern was especially true of the older generations, who had had better access to property, but still was found among younger generations when they have the space to occupy nearby. Salah, from the above story, lived with his wife in an apartment above his parents' house. Salah's uncle (*khālhu*) lived within a five-minute walk from them as well. Salah's married sister's house was somewhat further away, taking about ten to fifteen minutes in the car, but was much closer to her husband's family. Another family that I knew, somewhat less affluent than Salah's, had several generations living in the same home, and many members of the extended family lived in nearby houses in the Old City. If you wanted to meet anyone in that section of town, my informant told me, you only had to ask her mother or one of her aunts and they could introduce you to everyone and tell you who was related to whom and how.

Even in the upper middle class, families tried to stay close. My friend Yasmeen lived below her mother-in-law, with a maternal aunt and a maternal uncle nearby. Yasmeen's situation was particularly difficult for her, as she did not get along with her husband's mother and the older widowed woman was constantly watching her son's family to make sure they did not get up to anything unsavory. She never came down to visit, though her son and grandchildren would go up to see her, occasionally taking her food that Yasmeen had cooked. The mother-in-law remained an invisible watcher, constantly placing strain on Yasmeen who felt oppressed at the continual judging. This, in turn, altered the relationship and created tension between Yasmeen and her husband as the two tried to balance where in their lives his mother should figure. In these cases, the constant renegotiations that arose from observation of kinship overlapped with that of neighbors, with the proximity of the residences allowing another space in which to watch, consider and do kin relations.

Abu Hassan: The Damascene Robin Hood

Even if they were not related, some people's lives were much more ensconced in a neighborhood, where everyone within a small space of the city would know each other. Such an area might be as small as a single apartment building or it might cover several blocks. As whispers of suspicion and knowledge traveled across the various networks within such areas, it could impact the ways that people interacted and positioned themselves in relation to each other. Everyday food shopping would usually be done close by, and some self-employed people did have shops close to home. One's reputation, then, could cross the lines of home life, social life, and employment, giving neighborly observation a greater practical significance, something that could play out in unexpected ways (for my informants).

Everyone knows Abu Hassan. Or, everyone knows *of* Abu Hassan. He is the Robin Hood of Rukn al-Diin [a lower middle class area in the northern part of the city, known for having a large Kurdish population and being somewhat violent]. He robs from the rich and gives what he takes to the poor and the mosques. The *mukhābarāt* are always trying to get him, but they never can. Who is he and where does he come from? No one knows. But I saw him once. He had a shaved head and a short beard with a bit of grey and wore dark sunglasses. He was really big, very strong—like a bodyguard, even though he had two bodyguards. They were big and had sunglasses too, and they all sat in a car, with Abu Hassan in the middle. But he was respectable and in a suit, like a gentleman.¹⁵¹

My informant had been working with his brother at their shop—not far from their home—when they had seen a car with this man pull up nearby. A couple of seconds later, a neighbor of theirs who they knew, but not closely, walked up and sat down next to them. They were surprised, but happy to see him, offering him tea. He accepted and pointed at the man in the car, saying that *that* was the (in)famous Abu Hassan. The brothers looked at him with awe and then asked what he was doing in the area. “He’s here to steal from some of these shops; their owners have money to spare and are not very generous,” their neighbor replied. They asked him how he knew, and he said that he knew Abu Hassan and was in on the hit. “That’s why I’m

¹⁵¹ Abu Hassan was just one of several such figures working across different (often lower-middle class, minority) areas of Damascus. Though the stories about this particular man seem somewhat apocryphal, most everyone seemed to agree that these were real, active figures.

sitting here. If I sit here, they will leave your shop alone. I know you two and I know you're nice people and so I'm making sure they overlook your shop." The theft took place, and the police turned up shortly after. There was a brief chase and my informant said he could hear the sounds of guns from further up the street, but he later heard that Abu Hassan had escaped. When I asked my informant's sister about her opinion of the event, she rolled her eyes somewhat and said "Leave me out of it" (*mā dakhelnī*).

There are several noteworthy points to be taken from this narration. First, it is an example of how knowledge amongst neighbors could impact other, seemingly unrelated, aspects of their lives. Perhaps, had the other shop owners worked harder to cultivate good relations with their neighbors, they too would have been spared. Second, it demonstrated how the use of violence could create a sense of 'inside' in the community, formed around a collective pride (Gilsenan 1996) and represented by the hero figure of Abu Hassan who existed in opposition to both the 'rich' and the 'regime.' By failing to successfully respond, the police were demeaned and lost face, while Abu Hassan enacted the role of the ultimate victor. And yet, though my informant described the story with pride and as if Abu Hassan was 'one of the guys,' the fact that his sister dismissed the whole thing as somewhat silly indicates the masculine aspect to the whole issue. The men, especially the young men, of the area found in Abu Hassan a powerful figure who had come up from the masses of Rukn al-Diin and now brought, through his flaunting of law, a sense of pride to what might be an otherwise undistinguished group. His sister's reply, though, was to dismiss it, following her first statement with a saying: *walad, huwa walad, hatta iza shaykh al-balad* (a boy is a boy, even if he is the ruler of the land).

Finally, this narration presents an interesting contrast to other discussions of stealing and thieves. In many moments where I encountered the epithet of 'thief,' it was used to denounce someone (namely, the regime), to set them up as in violation of a shared moral code. Here, however, stealing moves out of the space of the immoral into the act of a hero. I feel that much of this difference rests on the open quality in which Abu Hassan violated the law and on the fact that he redistributed that which he took, rather than hoarding it. As Robin Hood, via his stealing, is a popular challenger

to an oppressive leader, so too is Abu Hassan.¹⁵² Here, Narotzky's and Moreno's (2002) "negative reciprocity" (that of taking) was not overlooked by my informants (indeed, it was flaunted), and was balanced by a form of "positive reciprocity" (that of giving). What Abu Hassan did that the regime did not was to engage in both forms and openly, adhering to the moral aesthetic if not the letter of the law. And as we have seen in a number of cases, visibility and the act of making one's actions visible and known play a large part in the doing of morality. Because Abu Hassan made his actions open and visible, he was following a positive moral form and was thus a figure of pride.¹⁵³ The regime, on the other hand, was a different matter, especially through their hoarding of wealth. Abu Hassan met the challenges to his moral authority and honor (in fact, he pre-empted them) by making his actions blatantly visible and passing on what he had taken. However, he did not do this in isolation; his morality and honor were not created on their own. He required the audience to observe, analyze, and present the potential for a test or challenge. Only with other people present could the knowledge about him be created and spread. The observers created the opportunity for him to answer any suspicions about his character through his actions, helping him to maintain his honor. Though they may not have been in on the heist, those observing were fully implicated, fully 'inside' the process of knowledge- and authority-creation. They were responsible for the honor of those they considered insiders. Much as was the case with friends. And we saw this same process of observation and implication with the *mukhābarāt* and with the regime itself.

* * *

What I am suggesting here is that narrations of conspiratorial, suspicious or otherwise invisible relations are among some of the ways in which Syrians organize and create knowledge about their world, be it concerning global politics, the regime,

¹⁵² Both stories though also contain indications of hierarchy and unequal distributions of power. In both cases, the 'thieves' come from a powerless sector of society and are facing the powerful. Both men manage to temporarily invert this relationship for themselves, but in doing so effectively highlight the continuing powerlessness of the classes they arose from.

¹⁵³ Gilsenan (1996) and Layne (1994) also note the importance of a leader being visible and challengeable in Lebanon and Jordan respectively. And Arafat and Hariri were condemned as immoral for those acts which they committed (or were narrated to have done) behind the scenes, such as secretly ferreting money away or raffling off a dead donkey by keeping its death a secret.

or their family and friends. They create momentary lines of connections or disconnections between people, that sometimes can be reproduced or made to take on a more permanent quality (e.g. Fatima moving out). Such narrations contain within them challenges and tests directed at other people's moral authority and honor, but this is not necessarily a negative process.¹⁵⁴ These challenges might be injurious, but what they do is provide a space for the object of the challenge to prove his moral status or maintain his honor. But ultimately this is the kind of thing one only does for 'insiders,' for people who share in a certain moral and social code and are/make themselves connected on those lines. In other words, social relations in Syria are maintained with both connections and disconnections. Thus, the challenging of a brother and the challenging of a regime both indicate and (re)create the brother and the regime as 'inside.' Challenges are not bad and they are not resistance here; they are just the *other* part of relating.

¹⁵⁴ Contrast this to Bourdieu (1977:63-64) who sees the relationship between brothers as the "weakest point" of the family structure and as divisive, rather than considering it a necessary part of doing kinship.

Conclusion: Connecting the Dots

When I was a teenager, my two younger siblings and I made up a game. Actually, we made up several, but on one particular day, we were trying to figure out to do with some stale marshmallows, an empty soda bottle, and the neighbor's swimming pool. What we wound up with was an odd derivation of baseball that we dubbed 'Mallowball.' Much like "Calvinball" from Bill Waterson's Calvin and Hobbes, there were rules (for example, hitting a marshmallow into the neighbor's pool always constituted a home run), but many were subject to change at any point during the game. This flexibility primarily applied to altering what and how many 'bases' there were and the order we had to run (connect) them. This became particularly problematic when our dog was assigned as one of the bases—she had a tendency to move of her own accord. The same held true for my parents; in fact, they became particularly troublesome as bases when they finally figured out the rules of the game and their role in it. By understanding and using our own rules against us, they were able to play with us, challenging our ability to successfully score runs by making themselves hard to catch. In other words, by (momentarily) ascribing to the same framework, they were able to play along and present us with challenges. Though they were, in a sense, disconnecting themselves from us by being a nuisance, they were only able to do so effectively *because* they were engaged in our game framework—they were, in effect, as 'inside' the game as we were. Their challenges, for us and them, became as much a part of the fun as sending marshmallows into the pool. Our parents might have been running away, but they were not resisting; they connected with us through their very disconnectivity. While I am not suggesting that Syrian narractions were a light-hearted game, I *am* suggesting that some of the ways of relating that I have (re)presented throughout this thesis are not so 'foreign' as one might initially expect.

Narractions, Challenges, and Doing Relations

In the first several chapter of this thesis, I explored how Syrians' narractions of identity-work and conspiracy were a way for Syrians to organize and position other

people in relation to themselves. I also used this performative analysis to examine how Syrians interacted with and related to their regime. Their narrations challenged the regime's moral and political authority, but also showed how ordinary Syrians were all (to some degree or another) connected to and implicated in the regime. The final chapters examined how Syrians used similar processes and narrations in interacting with other ordinary Syrians, creating groups of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' whom they connected with and disconnected from in a rapid, shifting (if not always identical) fashion. I showed how challenges were a central part of kinship and friendship relations and ultimately were not so much divisive as they were a core part of the relationships.

Thematically, what many of these narrations had in common was the presence of an invisible, inappropriate act, be it a presumed sexual liaison or political-economic-military plot to help someone gain and remain in power. Syrians expected and accepted that there were things that took place out of sight and were actively hidden. Through constant and critical observation, they were attuned to the small indications that pointed to the invisible, allowing them to make assessments and relate the resulting knowledge to others. In doing so, they were (re)creating social knowledge in a process that took both people and the unseen relations between them as its objects, drawing connections between these 'dots,' and then testing that knowledge in various ways. In the case of family and friend relations, observers with a degree of vested interest used humor, rumor and reporting to assess the possibility of an inappropriate act taking place. Aside from such verbal challenges, there were also those that were acted out, e.g. where friends tested each other's honor by actually attempting to seduce girlfriends away. Similarly, the world of politics was full of narrative tests and challenges, directed at international forces, the regime, or other 'Syrian' people. Humor, rumor and even reporting (to the *mukhābarāt*) were all methods by which Syrians spread and created knowledge. Political jokes, conspiracy theories and rumors of Mafia-like criminality tested the regime, challenging its adherence to the proper forms of a moral aesthetic (while creating a situation where, as in Mallowball, regime members were held accountable to the same framework and were thus all 'insiders'). As friends or brothers might have challenged each other's *sharaf* or a father might have challenged his son's autonomy, so did Syrians

challenge the legitimacy and authority of their regime and the powers that helped to put it in place.

In that case, I would argue that the political challenges are no more forms of ‘resistance’ to the regime than the interpersonal challenges are ‘resistance’ to family or friends. Salamandra (2004) presents a similar argument, showing how “contestation itself [is] a central mode of sociability” in Damascene relationships, and how in a social context this is not a form of resistance to the state, but a challenging of all other Syrians to negotiate power and identity. However, while she explicitly concerns herself with “sub-national” identities, I am extending the analysis of this mode of sociability into identity categories that could be considered ‘national’ or more overtly ‘political’ in nature. The antagonism is as much a part of the relations and connections as the solidarity.¹⁵⁵ In other words, the challenging and the criticism of the regime are not necessarily Syrians ‘resisting’ the oppression of their rulers, but are rather negative aspects of their everyday recreation of the regime.¹⁵⁶ There are, of course, positive and more “statist” (Navaro-Yashin 2002) aspects to this relationship as well—some Syrians did attend rallies of their own volition, some were beginning to wave Syrian flags, most paid their bills, many used public transportation, all were proud of the safety of their streets, they engaged in a state-as-family rhetoric, etc. But it was the positive and negative aspects, and the duplicitous shifting between them, that constituted the process of relating and (re)creating relations, connections, and even the state in Syria.

Dots and Connections

That I have used social theory only insofar as it advances the understanding of [my informant’s] story, rather than made her story serve theory, reflects

¹⁵⁵ Contrast this to more common ways of looking at kin challenging. E.g. Rothenberg (2004:114) says of a community in Palestine: “social relationships are nurtured carefully in Artas, maintained through daily acts of reciprocity and respect, and *controlled through gossip and other acts of honor maintenance*” (my emphasis). She portrays gossip and honor maintenance as controlling factors in kinship, guiding the relations that prefigure them, whereas I am arguing that these challenges are constructive and even necessary for the doing of personal (and political) relations in Syria.

¹⁵⁶ I am reminded here of Jameson’s (1981:39,41) idea of ‘mediation’ as the “establishment of relationships,” with difference being described as “the distinguishing of two phenomena from each other, their structural separation, the affirmation that they are not the same, and that in quite specific and determinate ways, is *also* a form of mediation.”

my preference for keeping method and theory sensitive to the historical exactness and density of human life (Borneman 1998:184).

Like Borneman, when I initially began to think about and write this work, I tried to avoid getting tangled up in the theoretical literature, preferring to let my ethnographic models inform my anthropological ones, rather than vice versa (Jean-Klein and Riles 2005). I thought about how Syrians would take seemingly independent events and people and link them together in conspiracy narrations about politics or girlfriends, or how they would divide people into groups in the courses of identity-work. Or how they would narrate *wasṭa* and the *mukhābarāt*. I made a mobile mind-map on my wall, in the hopes that moving the different specific objects around in relation to each other would reveal the connections or divisions between them. It was then that I realized that I was already engaged in the same model of knowledge production as my informants. We were both making connections and disconnections between sets of objects. Like Syrians, I was able to reposition my objects at will to suit whatever ideas I was considering on a given day. As I described in Chapter 3, I eventually realized that this process reminded me strikingly of the children's game of Connect-the-Dots, except that my dots were not numbered, and when they represented people, I had to consider that those dots were simultaneously involved in observing and drawing their own images—a fact that Syrians were well aware of. And it was entirely possible that one person's lines might be another's dots, i.e. relating-as-processes and relations-as-objects could each become the other. They were duplexitous. For instance someone who observed a couple in the street might see the connection that the two were drawing to each other (by being together). However, the observer might also objectify this connection as a singular incident (dot) that, when analyzed alongside other such dots, would allow them to draw a larger image of an inappropriate relationship between the two—(re)creating a relationship-as-object that could be tested through appropriate methods (which effect further dis/connections). Or, in reflexive moments, Syrians (and I) would analyze the connections that they themselves had made (e.g. laughing over their own penchant for conspiracy theorizing), turning their own lines into dots.

When looking for other models of social knowledge production, I came across that of fractals and scales. As I have argued, I do not think this is applicable to

the processes I observed in Syria. It does not allow for the shifting nature of Syrian narrations or for the momentary quality of the relations being (re)made. Equally problematic was the presence of scales that is inherent within the fractal model, requiring the observer to move away or closer in to see the pattern being repeated. While Syrians see and recognize such differences as ethnicity, religion, the state, the international realm, kinship, individual, etc., they do not enact and narrate them as inherently hierarchical scales, a fact I tried to demonstrate here through the awkwardness that arose from the artificiality of the 'scalar' chapter arrangement. In Syria, it was not that identical processes were being repeated on every scale, but rather that the same processes were being repeated *with different people*. Hence Iranians could be inside and outside, as could Alawis, as could one's brothers. There was no one who was not within narrative reach. The connect-the-dots model reduces (or expands?) the concept of scale into a single field of relations that can and does incorporate everyone.

Finally, the fractal image is somewhat vague in regards to agency. It seems to be a pre-determined image that does not allow for active participation in and creation of the processes that it would describe. The metaphor of connecting the dots, on the other hand, is premised on the idea that people do have agency to actively organize and know the world. This could include 'resistance' in certain situations, but, I argue, does not do so in the ways that ordinary Syrians relate to their state in the course of the everyday. In fact, connecting-the-dots could just as easily provide a model for more top-down examinations of the state, by examining how agents of the state make and reaffirm certain connections in their everyday lives as a (intentionally activated and thus recreated category of) representative of the state.

However, this model is not entirely random; it also allows for some structural pre-figuring of the field of relations (what I have glossed as 'potential connections'). This is especially obvious when dealing with things like Syrians' identity-work or *wasṭa*'. Children, for example, are brought up observing the connections that their parents and families make, often resulting in their continuation and (re)activation of the same lines. If a father tells his son they are Kurdish (thus [re]creating a Kurdish category of insiders), the son is likely to internalize and repeat this declaration, thus adding to its effect of permanence. The same might be true of belonging to a religion,

a state, or a family. Identity categories, then, are neither primordial nor (definitively) constructed (or imagined), but are continuously being *reconstructed*. The likelihood of certain connections being activated over others depends on what people have learned and observed to be appropriate. Further, I suggested with *wasta* that all Syrians could connect themselves to the regime in some way or another. However, some people have fewer ‘degrees’ of connection than others. For instance, the cousin of the president was much more directly linked to the regime (one degree of removal) than my friend’s husband who helped me obtain my visa (two degrees). Indeed, the latter would likely be another degree or two of connection away from the president, creating a contingent set of structure-like ‘levels’ to society. But the specifics of these levels are arbitrary rather than permanent features of the social field, appearing and disappearing as rapidly as the activated connections that move across them; here they are only equated to the state hierarchy because that is *my* focus. From another angle, the president is equally as removed from my friend and her family, thus momentarily putting him on a ‘lower’ rung in relation to the connections that are most important to her.

This is not to imply that all ‘dots’ are created equal as far as individual narrators are concerned. The connections that one has to the regime or that regime officials have to international conspirators is not going to be of the same quality as one’s connections to one’s sister or brother, especially given Joseph’s (1994) idea of connectivity (see Chapter 7). But, as she goes on to show, psychodynamic process, such as the love, trust, and distrust that I have focused on in Chapter 7, can be a central part of the formation and reproduction of broader forms of familial organization, specifically patriarchy. In her article, Joseph also argues that kinship has for too long been analyzed under the rubric of either psychodynamic processes of love that portray an emotive, harmonic picture or social structural processes of power and violence (1994:52-54). By examining love and power, she tries to show how they are psychodynamic, reproductive of social patterns, *and* mutually implicated. There is no violence within families without love and vice versa.

I have been presenting a similar sort of argument here. By shifting my focus through the family and the state, I am not attempting to merely equate all types of relating in Syria, but rather am suggesting that positive and negative connections

between individuals and groups are as much a part of the productive process of identity as they are divisive. Narrations and action of unity and division, be they familial, state, or global in nature, serve to reproduce the very categories and structures that they would sometimes seem to rail against. The regime is not implicated in one's self and familial identity in the same way one's brother is, but the processes of social formation and identity that work through the combination of both positive and negative connections contain too many similarities to be ignored.

For all of these various reasons, I suggest connecting the dots as a metaphor for understanding how Syrians produce social knowledge. It is surely not without its flaws, but allows for those things which seemed to be most central and regular in my experience of Syrians' narrations of their everyday lives: shifting knowledge and effects, hidden events and relations, connections and disconnections, challenges, and agency among people to (re)create the world.

Re(dis)covering the State, Maybe

As I said at the very beginning, this was meant to be an ethnography of the state. By avoiding the use of the term throughout and instead referring to the Syrian leadership apparatus as the 'regime,' I both followed my informants' leads and sought to avoid taking certain pre-conceptualizations for granted. Because I was trying to see how the state might be (re)created in the course of ordinary people's everyday lives, it was important for me to consider and (re)present it in the same ways Syrians did. I did not want to construct something that they themselves did not. Nor did I want to assume the sorts of structural and moral divides that I addressed in the introduction, namely those between the good people and the evil state. This also meant moving away from analysis that centered on the interactions between 'ruler' and 'ruled' (cf. Borneman 1998), for to do so would return me to the same dichotomy, just cased in different words. I also wanted to avoid relying on the concept of resistance as an easy fall back and the automatic reaction to the presence of 'power' (cf. Reeves 1995:307).

Perhaps it could be argued that I have not left behind the state as we know it at all and have merely replaced the word 'state' with 'regime.' I would disagree, for there is a fundamental difference between the Syrian regime as I have tried to present

it and how the state is commonly approached in other forums—namely that the regime is composed of *people*, rather than being a collection of institutions and self-replicating ideologies. In other words, the Syrian state was not (constructed to be) some impersonal thing that is ‘up there’ or ‘out there,’ but rather as a *collection of people* who were as likely (or more!) to act for their own benefit than for that of the population they were meant to be leading and caring for. The failings of the state were not described as structural problems—the constitution itself could be changed at will, undermining any sort of structural permanence for the ‘state’ (see page 134, note 91)—but as derived from politicians’ corruptness. The members of the regime/state were “thieves,” “criminals,” and like the “Mafia,” but they were also, in moments, nice or learned people (e.g. Dr. Bashar). The regime was equated with members of the Alawi sect, and specific families within that sect, a group seen to lack the moral authority or legitimacy to rule. Yet, at the same time, no particular group *was* narrated to have that authority, especially given the expectation that politics could corrupt anyone. As happened with ordinary people, (members of) the regime did not always adhere to the proper moral aesthetic. But that they *did share* the same aesthetic as my informants, indicates that they were ‘insiders.’ In short, examining the Syrian state from the perspective of Syrians as they engaged it in the everyday revealed that it was *not* a series of processes, institutions, or the like; it was a series of people. As such, “ordinary” Syrians had as large a part to play in creating those people as the state as they did in any form of “identity-work.” The state-as-people (i.e. regime) was thus (re)constructed in the everyday narrations of Syrians.

This is not to say that state figures lacked the ability to affect ordinary Syrians in unequal ways. Syrians paid bills, were conscripted into the military, stood in queues for new passports or identity cards, and lost their houses in presidential decrees. But then again, they shared internet access so not everyone had to pay, dodged the military, pulled strings to have official paperwork done for them, bought and sold illegal Ottoman coins, and continued to live in their houses after they had been repossessed. But I stress that these were not forms of resistance to power; Syrians had no desire to topple the regime. They depicted the aftermath of such a movement as being far more hellish and violent than anything they had to live with currently. Rather, I consider these moments and the narrations of them as tests of

the state's moral and political authority. That the state is not able to properly respond to such tests indicates that (like Abeer who misread the test and revealed her ineptitude) members of the regime do not always live up to their roles as leaders and protectors.

But, and perhaps most importantly, the state-as-people is not external to its population. Certain people might have a greater ability to wield political power, but “ordinary” Syrians were as much implicated in the processes of this power as members of the regime. Through *reshweh*, *wasta*, and even things like military service, people were able to and readily did activate connections between themselves and people working within the state apparatus. Ultimately, no one was fully disconnected from the state. Any sharp lines that we might think to set up between state and people, or ruler and ruled, fade in the presence of these lines that criss-crossed the personal landscape. Ultimately, then, rather than a heavily moralistic State/People divide, I suggest that the Syrian state was premised on momentary divisions and connections between people. As such, Syrians were just as capable of creating positive relations between people (including themselves) as they were at creating lines to divide them. The Syrian state becomes just another set of dots in the field of relations. And so my ethnography of the state has become an ethnography of the connections between people.

Bringing it Home

[Conspiracy thinking] assumes there is an order to the messy shape of the earth, and that things can become clear when we can properly see the plan. This is what Hetherington has called ‘the will to connect’, the desire to make a line of sight which attaches diverse objects in patterned ways (Parker 2001:204, citation removed).

In that chapter, Parker goes on to argue that conspiracy thinking and the human sciences have much in common. Parish (2001:8) suggests that conspiracy theorizing is a way of “assembling possibilities and information...in a culture obsessed with connections and interpretation,” a description that could apply as equally to the culture of anthropologists as Syrians. And Boyer (2006:337) outright states that “one mode of conspiracy and transparency—ethnography—has sought to reveal another.”

This is not meant to demean anthropological processes of knowledge production, but, as I suggested in the introduction, opens up the possibility that conspiracy thinking can be just as valid a form of knowledge production as our own. Both are processes based in participation and observation. Both attempt to trace out connections between people and ideas that might not be readily visible. Both are premised, in fact, on the idea that there are unseen forces at work in society. Practitioners of both make connections from what they observe and produce narrations that relate *and* (re)create certain dis/connections. These narrations are then submitted to friends and peers, who will reconsider them and add their own input. Both are reflexive, examining their own narrations, relating the speakers to the processes described within the narrations, and critically considering other people's narrations. Indeed, though I have been talking around the state, the focus of my gaze in this thesis has been as much anthropology as Syrian politics.

I am not attempting to directly equate anthropological analysis with conspiracy theorizing, though they have their similarities. Instead, I am trying to show how both can be considered to be forms of a broader process of knowledge production that I have called connecting the dots. Maurer (2002) suggests that anthropological knowledge is obtained through shifting scales. However, I would argue that this is only true if we do not consider narrations to be first-order objects, in other words, if we assume that there is some first-order 'truth' that all narrations are ultimately referring back to. But it is unimportant to me (as an anthropologist) whether or not the U.S. and Israel helped Hafez al-Asad into power or whether there is such a distinct thing as a 'Kurd' or whether someone's girlfriend cheated on her boyfriend with his best friend. What I consider important is the fact that Syrians related these narrations to me. Those narrations are the 'reality' that I am taking into consideration (i.e. they are my dots). The anthropological knowledge that I am producing is derived from *my* narrating the connections and disconnections that I saw taking place between figures who were *themselves* engaged in the same process. Even the literature that I invoke throughout this thesis is a part of making connections. I reach across a broad field of dots and connect myself to scholarly works on a variety of different peoples, places, and topics.

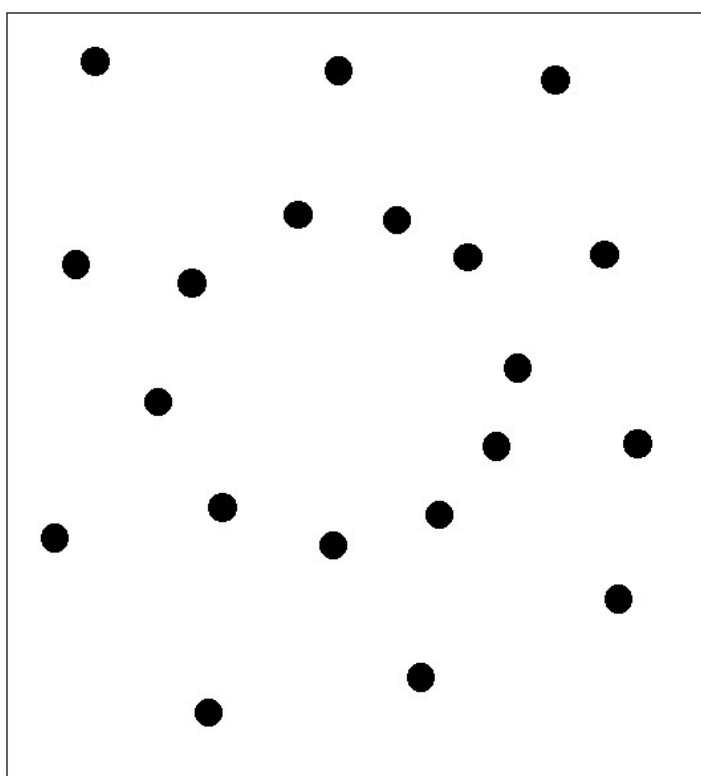
If I am reflexive enough, I can even say that in the process of describing how ethnography is connecting the dots, I myself am actively engaged in doing connections vis-à-vis this narration (i.e. thesis). By citing certain authors, leaving authors out, agreeing with some, and arguing against others, I am actively connecting and disconnecting myself from these other people (and the theories and ethnographies they have produced). They are as much embedded in my field of potential relations as my Syrian informants and myself. And in activating certain connections, I am (like my friend's husband and his *wasṭa* chain) hoping to strengthen the potential for those authors to activate them again the other way via connecting to and citing my work (for good or ill) in their future writings.

And there is most certainly a 'shifting' element to anthropology-work. What I write here can be read and interpreted in different ways. I myself have been intentionally 'doing' multiple sets of connections throughout the thesis, some explicit, some not: it is an ethnography of the state, but also of ordinary people; I am analyzing politics but also kinship, friendship, and anthropology; and so on. I am even involved in challenging, disagreeing with other authors' works at least as often as I agree with what has been said before. But I cannot be said to be 'resisting' anthropology. The challenges are a central part of being involved in the proper aesthetic of the anthropological (and academic) community. By this 'disconnecting,' I am, in fact, revealing just how connected I am and thus am making myself so.

* * *

As Syrians living their lives or doing the state, as ethnographers 'in the field,' or as anthropologists writing up our analyses, we are always engaged in the act of positioning dots in relation to other dots and tracing out the relations between them. Using conspiracy theory, identity-work, humor, rumor and literature reviews (among other things), we make our connections and present them to our audiences. Nothing and nowhere is out of our reach, not politics, economics, religion, identity, family, theory or region of the world. Even the sometimes problematic issue of comparison becomes theoretically simple—it is just another act of connecting certain dots. We and the field of relations around us are in constant motion. There is no possibility for

a truly still ethnographic moment: if we assume a photographic stillness, then we will only see ambiguity, rather than the rapid shifting between black and white. It is, I would argue, how we already come to know the world...now I just ask that we recognize it as such. Connect the Dots.



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